

Z R WINS

FITZHUGH GREEN



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ZR WINS



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[page 260]

Z R W I N S

BY

FITZHUGH GREEN ✓

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF THE ERIK," ETC.



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CHAPTER I

THE TRAIL GROWS HOT

A TAXICAB approached the Army and Navy Club at dangerous speed. With sudden clank and squeak it came to an abrupt stop opposite the dignified main entrance. Out sprang a young man very sunburned, vastly hurried, and undeniably handsome in his gold-striped, brass-buttoned naval uniform and nautical cap worn rakishly a bit back and to one side on his close-cropped head.

"Wait!" he commanded sharply to the driver, and in two leaps was across the pavement. Just inside he collided with a major general. Endeavoring to apologize without delaying his precipitous rush, he stepped on a retired rear admiral's favorite corn.

"Anything for Eppley—Bliss Eppley?" he threw at the desk clerk, and began drumming with nervous knuckles upon the glass cigar counter.

"Lieutenant Eppley, sir?" The clerk held out a long official-looking letter.

"Righto!"

He seized the envelope, tore one end off with a vicious jerk, and read:

ZR WINS!

*State Department,
Washington, D. C.*

April 29, 1924.

Lieutenant Bliss Eppley, U. S. N.

Army and Navy Club, Washington, D. C.

Sir:

The Secretary of State has referred your proposal to me for reply. You must realize that the amazing character of what you suggest compels us to act very conservatively. However, after examining your credentials, we are disposed to accept your offer and will lend what assistance we can.

The Secretary has further asked me to remind you of the risk you are running in acting over the heads of Navy Department officials.

If you will call at my office in the State Department before noon to-day I will give you your instructions.

Wishing you success in your venture, I remain,

Cordially yours,

*R. F. Y. Manning,
For the Secretary of State.*

The young officer pushed his cap back with a sudden gesture of relief. "They bit, anyway," he muttered. "Something's bound to fall now!" He spun on his heel. "Here, boy, tell that taxi of mine I'll be out in three minutes." Not waiting for the elevator, he dashed to the stairs and disappeared up them three at a time.

Three minutes and ten seconds later Lieutenant Eppley galloped down the same stairs four at a time. His uniform had been replaced by a becoming civilian suit that brought out the clean lines of his well-knit figure.

He entered the labyrinth of the State Department's interminable corridors with almost a sense of reverence. The keen-eyed, quiet-spoken man to whom his card soon

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brought him, accentuated his sense of the profound significance of this vital branch of the government.

"Sit down, Mr. Eppley." So low-pitched was the voice that Bliss found himself wondering involuntarily if the speaker were afraid of being overheard.

Pointedly there was no reference to circumstances leading up to the interview. "You are to call at the Richmond Hotel," said the official simply, "and ask for a room in the name of Waverly. You must be there by noon and register under that name."

"Should I be armed, sir?" queried Bliss.

A faint smile crossed the grave face before him.

"Scarcely, Mr. Eppley. When the State Department once decides to use an outsider like yourself, no stone is left unturned to assure both his safety and his success. While you are, of course, in the Navy, we look upon you for the time being only as a patriotic citizen who is willing to risk his professional reputation for the larger interests of his country."

A little glow of pleasure stole over Bliss.

"Now that the Navy has definitely decided to send its new airship on a trip of scientific exploration across the north polar regions, we hope that you may go along. If you don't, we plan to solicit the Department's specific aid in thwarting the villainy afoot, the existence of which you have so cleverly discovered. But such a course is not desirable."

"Too much publicity?"

"No, not exactly that. Simply we prefer that one person, such as yourself, act as our confidential man on the case. Infinite red tape will be thus avoided; and the chance of our moves being found out will be greatly reduced. In no sense will you be disloyal to your service; but, rather, doing your duty more fully than would otherwise be possible. Learn what you can from the secret

meeting this morning. Persuade naval authorities to enlist your aid if you are able. And report in full to us as progress is made."

"But at the hotel, sir. How—?"

The other held up his hand. "I was coming to that. In our service you will find yourself called upon to do things in a strange way. Secrecy means so much. We might have sent one of our own agents to-day. But we thought you would be better prepared if you yourself could overhear the bargaining we believe will take place at the Richmond."

"Bargaining, as I suggested?"

"Exactly. So we have secured a room. Inside it you will find a heater grating near the floor on one wall. Unscrew this and follow your nose. I shall have a man in the lobby. But upstairs you will have to look out for yourself."

Thus ended the interview.

As he sped toward the hotel, Bliss Eppley's mind reviewed swiftly the events that had brought him to the very threshold of success he so long had pictured. He recalled the first flash of his great idea when, five years before, during a European cruise, he had stood in the museum at Bergen and the attendant had pointed out a yellow parchment in the specimen case, saying in awed tones:

"The last sign, sir. The very last of them. Maybe they died. Maybe they didn't. Maybe their story is not yet done."

"You mean—?" Bliss had asked him wonderingly.

"That perhaps somewhere they still live. But I am an old man, sir. And we old 'uns have queer notions. Now, in this next case. . . ."

But a train of thought had been awakened. The parchment was an ancient receipt for oil. The oil had been

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sent from Greenland in the fifteenth century. This oil had been part of the trade between Norway and her colonies in South Greenland.

Swiftly Bliss recalled the tragic facts of that great historical riddle: how the early colonies had prospered; how war and plague had swept Europe; how Norway had abandoned her northern children to their fate; how two hundred years later Greenland had been rediscovered and no sign found of the once prosperous settlements.

And now the old museum attendant's half-prophetic words: "*Maybe they died. Maybe they didn't. Maybe their story is not yet done. Perhaps somewhere they still live. . . .*"

Like a hound a-trail Bliss sprang after the scent. Scientists declared to him that land might lie north in the vast unexplored area of the Polar Sea above Alaska. Travelers from the frozen wilderness told him of Eskimo traditions indicating that the vanished Norsemen had not suffered and died at all, but had migrated to another happier country to the north and west of Greenland.

"Could this legendary country lie in that enormous unknown space near the Pole which no man yet has entered?" Bliss asked himself again and again.

The question stung him into a fever of curiosity. Day and night the riddle seared his thoughts.

From the museum in Bergen he had hurried to the national archives. By virtue of his position as a visiting naval officer he had been permitted access to musty vaults, to records centuries old, to the opinions and surmises of men who had made life studies of the very sort of theory that had suddenly gripped his own excited mind and had suggested finding in the Polar Sea a colony lost for five whole centuries.

Then had come the other trail: War's terrible aftermath, all the fearful intensity of human avarice and

hatred. The acute world-wide realization that the existence of any given nation, from now on, critically depended upon what it might seize from the present crisis of world affairs. Which put together and hung beside the pattern of whisperings that reached his ears led Bliss into the very heart of a great conspiracy: a plot to link the East and West across the top of the globe and leave America dangling helplessly between.

Yet he still had lacked substantial proof. So he had importuned the Navy Department for transfer to the Asiatic Fleet. For six months no clue had come his way. Then abruptly and by the purest accident he had struck the trail again. Once more he managed transfer. Hurried back to Washington. Laid the groundwork of his plans before those best qualified to act.

"London and Tokyo are on opposite sides of the Pole," he had explained. "They represent the gigantic markets of Europe and Asia. Halfway between, in the unexplored area of the Polar Sea, may lie an unknown land. If so, transpolar traffic becomes a fact at once. For such a land would provide a half-way station. Cunning minds in Asia realize this. This summer those minds intend to find that land. And their tactics will be such that they cannot lose. So why not get our newest airship there first and win the prize for America?"

But that was before the new scheme to use the ZR-5 for a polar flight. He had been rebuffed. Too expensive in these years of high taxes, he had been informed. And public opinion was already suspicious beyond the Government's power to allay. Even the State Department had turned a cold shoulder until to-day. Now, at last, he felt he had won their help. But the cost had been great. He had been forced to divulge that which should have been kept secret. Spies were everywhere. Once certain persons knew, Bliss suspected he must fail. For

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it would be impossible, as he had found already, to convince Washington of the danger that lay ahead.

Meanwhile another smoldering ember within him had flared up. That was his affection for Joan Beckett. Yet this part of the young man's subterranean pyrotechnics may have been only a branch of the other. For enchanting Joan was the daughter of a brilliant and distinguished admiral. And this admiral was parent of more than Joan. For Admiral Beckett first of all had fathered the idea of sending the Navy's giant new dirigible to the uttermost corners of the earth.

"Which means," Bliss had cried on the deck of the ship he served, "that the ZR-5 could fly to the North Pole and hunt for the missing Norsemen! And I could go with her! And find them! And Joan will be so proud of me there won't be any question—"

At which point in the poor lad's daydream would arise like an evil thing the ghostly image of a thick and florid face with coarsened features creased into a smirk of triumph, the face of one Thorne Welchor, his strongest rival for Joan Beckett's heart and hand.

In justice to the man we must here record that to the casual observer Welchor was far from being the arch-fiend his young competitor always pictured him.

Certainly he was an adventurer and a social parasite. His type is to be found in every nucleus of cosmopolitan society such as frequents a national capital like Washington. Outwardly he was a prosperous, graceful, presentable, and entertaining man of the world. Yet inwardly he was a true hunter, seeking those whom he might devour for his own selfish gain. No doubt the excitement of the chase he found alluring. He must have been brave and chivalrous under some circumstances. But the fact remained that those who really knew him—and they were few and scattered—knew him for an unscrupulous rascal

whose effrontery tolerated no bounds by human law or conscience.

Thus it was to Eppley's credit that he had instinctively pierced the man's disguise. Whether Welchor actually possessed the wealth he pretended to, or was impeccable in dress and manners, mattered little in the young officer's estimation. What really counted was that Welchor was in certain far-off quarters deemed to be a crook, and a proven one as well. For him to marry a decent girl like Joan Beckett was a catastrophe to be prevented at any cost.

"Thorne Welchor couldn't really love her!" Bliss argued in his heart. "He is the kind of man who couldn't ever really love any one but himself!"

Whence would come fresh fuel to the conflagration in his breast; until his mind would seem to sizzle like a surcharged boiler ready to explode and blow his sanity into atoms. Even in moments when no explosion threatened Bliss was always conscious of being torn this way and that by forces greater than his strength: the luring mystery of the lost north colony; the lurking menace of a man like Welchor; and, finally, an undying love for his Joan.

A wave of excitement swept him as he swerved around the last corner just before reaching his destination. The adventure of it! The romance of just living! Even if the final truth fell short of his great dream. He smiled.

Then suddenly his expression fell to steely grimness. For in that instant he remembered this was no common lark; no simple opportunity to make of himself a hero. Vast issues were at stake. The very existence of his own beloved country, for which so many times he had already risked his life. The peace, the security, the prosperity of generations to come!

At the hotel he inquired for his reservation. "Room

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for Mr. Waverly?" There came a certain thrill of intrigue in using the alias.

While he did so he was conscious of being scrutinized by a tall dark man in a soft hat leaning against a near-by pillar. As he signed "G. D. Waverly" to the register the man approached him and, though seeming not to see him, muttered as he passed:

"You must hurry, Mr. Eppley. They have arrived."

In his room Bliss looked around. Yes, there was a heater, a hot-air pipe about two feet square near the bottom of one wall. A metal lattice protected it. It was the work of but a minute or two to unscrew this grating.

"Guess this must be what was meant," he reflected as he peered into the black depths of the pipe. "But—"

Suddenly he cocked his head. Out of the abyss below came the faint murmur of voices. Becoming accustomed to the darkness his eye caught a steel beam several feet down. Throwing off his coat he lowered himself carefully. To his joy he discovered the pipe divided at this point, one section leading to his own room, the other apparently to the adjoining room.

Light dawned. "So this is where they're to meet." He grinned in the darkness. "And I'm to get the low-down on them at last!"

Skillfully he crawled upward. The room he peered into was an exact duplicate of his own except that in its center was a large table. On this table lay a mass of papers, maps, drawings, and writing materials. Around the table sat four men. Two of the men were Orientals; two were white. As Bliss' eye fell upon the larger of the white men, a sleek individual of forty-odd, he started. "Thorne Welchor! Well I'll be damned!"

So besides being a rival for Joan Beckett's heart here was the scoundrel bartering for the other prize with which

Fate had beckoned Bliss. The conflagration inside the eavesdropper bade fair to become a holocaust!

Welchor was talking:

"Take it or leave it," he was saying in a disagreeable tone. "You gentlemen know what you are up against!"

The elder Oriental picked up a piece of paper with delicate fingers and scanned the array of figures on it. "A vast sum of money," he protested faintly.

"Tightwads!" commented the other white man. Bliss noted with disgust his thin evil face and drooping lids.

"Shut up, Scammell!" warned Welchor. "These are gentlemen we are dealing with." To the Orientals he went on: "Remember you are competing with the United States, Great Britain, and France. Both Belgium and Norway have unofficial entries that ought also to be considered. The winning nation is good for ten million dollars a year profit even if the idea of this crazy young naval officer fizzles."

Bliss in his dusty hiding place scowled and clenched his fist.

"You think, Meester Welchor, there is a chance he may be right?"

The big man smote the table with his fist.

"A damn good chance, sir! I've talked it all over with him at a certain young lady's house where I often see him, and I believe he has the dope. But his Government probably won't support him. They have to be too blamed conservative."

Bliss grinned. "Won't support me, eh? Perhaps not. But they'll let me hear myself talked about, you low-down traitor! That's what I get for trying to be nice to one of Joan's friends!"

"It'll be a tough flight," growled Scammell. "Over two thousand miles at a hop."

Welchor grabbed a chart. "Stop your whining!" he

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snapped. "I bet we make land inside the first six hours!"

"Land, yes. But what kind? Tell me that, will you?"

"If I could do you think I'd be committing treason with this pair of rice eaters?" he hissed.

A mild voice interrupted. "If you fail, Meester Welchor—?"

"The others will fail, too!"

"You will see to that?"

Welchor shrugged and gave his white companion a wink.

"Easiest thing we do! Eh, Scammell?"

"The blame will not fall on our country?"

"The blame will fall on the fools who will pit themselves against us. If they choose to ignore the warnings we shall send them they can take the consequences."

The elder Oriental rose. "Then, my friends, it is a bargain. This day I deposit one hundred thousand dollars at your bank for preliminary expenses. You say you have an option on the plane already. It is better that we make no more meetings of any sort. I shall not go north with you."

"How about the other payments?" put in Welchor distrustfully.

"On the day we receive authentic word that the flight is completed," responded the yellow man slowly, "five hundred thousand dollars will be added to your bank account."

Scammell's wolfish eyes glinted. "And if there's land?"

"A million dollars, Meester Scammell."

For a moment the two sat tensely eying one another as if each were measuring the other's ability to conclude the strange bargain. Yet to Bliss it seemed that the dominating note in the yellow man's expression was one of infinite contempt. Despite his own iniquity the pagan

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could not quite hide his loathing for betrayal of one's country.

Welchor leaned forward with a curious quizzical look. "There is one little point I'd like to inquire about," he said. "That's how you know you can trust us."

Both Orientals permitted themselves the luxury of slight smiles. The younger opened his mouth, but before he could speak a dull humming sound borne on the wings of a springtime breeze drifted suddenly in through the open window.

Scammell sprang to his feet. "There's the dirigible now!" he cried, and ran to the window.

"You said—?" persisted Welchor.

"Nothing, yet," smiled the elder Oriental. After a moment he added: "We trust you, Meester Welchor, because we think you are happy in thees life."

At the white man's comical look Bliss had to smother a chuckle.

The distant hum became more audible. "*Look!*" cried Scammell excitedly from the window.

Unable to resist the conspirator's enthusiasm Bliss ducked back through his passage and into his own room. Peering cautiously out his first glance caught, to his vast delight, the familiar figure of Joan Beckett on the sidewalk directly opposite the hotel. Like all about her she, too, was gazing upward. With a little exclamation of joy Bliss seized his hat and coat and raced for the street.

CHAPTER II

THE WORLD'S LAST RIDDLE

EXCITEMENT prevailed. . . .
From one end of Pennsylvania Avenue to the other swept an electric thrill of amazement. Press reports had prepared no one for such a sight as this. Facts, figures, prophecies, claims, exaggerations, all fell short of the real exhibition.

Traffic jammed. Women fainted. Men fought and struggled with purposeless agitation. Policemen shouted for order. Honking cars and clanging trolleys added to the din.

But every eye remained fixed upon the sky.

America's newest sensation hung there: the gigantic dirigible, ZR-5. As though suspended by an invisible thread the huge airship swung slowly towards the center of the city. Her silvered hull sparkled in the morning sunshine. Glint of her whirring propeller blades was occasionally visible. A broad band of color marked the underbody where the cabin structures were.

Over the Capitol the ZR-5 circled gracefully and settled gently towards the avenue so packed with marveling humanity.

In the shelter of a doorway stood the two young people.

"Oh, she's too *beautiful!*" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes," assented Eppley absently. He alone of all the multitude gazed not at the sky. "Yes, beautiful," he echoed, his eyes well engaged with the slender figure before him; the soft curve of the girl's cheek; the fascinat-

ing pursing of her lips as she enjoyed with childlike enthusiasm the spectacle aloft.

Suddenly he, too, glanced upward. Something of the morning's freshness was reflected in his clean features and ruddy skin. And as his keen blue eyes focused upon the dirigible a certain alertness came over him. He shot a glance at the tower clock across the street.

"Look here, Joan," he exclaimed, "I forgot to tell you that I have to appear before the Navy Air Board this morning."

His companion whirled about with a little "Oh!" of disappointment.

"But you said you'd go to the station with me! You're always rushing off!"

"I know, but—" His look wavered to the crowd, to the mammoth airship now almost abreast them, rushing sixty miles an hour through the invisible air.

"But what, Bliss?"

"It means so much. You know it does. It may mean *you*, dear! If I can get them to let me make the trip in the ZR-5 your father would no longer object."

A hurt look touched the sweet face turned up to his.

"He will always object while you are in the Navy, Bliss. Just now I think he'd really rather I marry Thorne Welchor."

"*Welchor!* Why, Joan, if I could tell—"

"Don't, Bliss," she interrupted. "I like Thorne. Play fair."

"What do you mean 'play fair'?" A horrible suspicion crossed his mind.

"I mean that you are not the only one interested in the Navy's polar flight next month. Mr. Welchor is perfectly mad about the whole scheme. Daddy sits by the hour telling him the plans."

For the space of a second an awful thought seared

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the young man's mind. But pressure of the moment drove it out again. "I am playing fair, Joan," he retorted. "That's the whole trouble. Anyway, I've got to run this moment." He hesitated, then bent his head. "Joan, dear, couldn't it be me no matter what happens?"

"No matter what happens, Bliss?" she echoed with just the faintest touch of wistfulness.

"Yes," he whispered.

The dirigible was now past the Treasury. Hum of its purring motors was wafted back as the reply came almost inaudibly:

"I think so, dear."

With something between a choke and a shout the ecstatic youth seized the girl's shoulders and drew her to him.

"Then I'll make them believe me!" he whispered fiercely. "You watch!"

For an instant he wavered. The lips so near his own were very inviting. The brown eyes very shining. In that second the swarming populace did not exist. . . . Then common sense returned. He smiled. Next moment he was gone.

Plunging through the crowd he felt again the flames of love and hope. True, Joan's father, Admiral Beckett, opposed his suit. And likewise true was Thorne Welchor's insistent wooing of the girl. But Welchor was a traitor to his country. The meeting Bliss had overheard had settled that. Armed with this knowledge Bliss might at once eliminate his rival from the game.

Yet infinitely larger for the moment was the other issue. And if Welchor's backers were warned too soon so that the villainy of their tool were known very easily could they hire another man to do the work.

Then there was the complication of Joan's father. Were the Admiral taken into the State Department's con-

fidence at this critical time he, too, might unwittingly divulge enough by action only to put the plotters on their guard. That he should favor a man of Welchor's outward bearing and reputed bank account for a son-in-law was entirely to be expected. Indeed, as against the youthful and apparently hairbrained Eppley a tempered man of the world was infinitely to be desired.

As for the Navy itself, Bliss longed to go to the Department and say: "Look here, old timers, you've got to wake up. If the United States doesn't get her airship into the unknown area northeast of Alaska before any one else and find the land that probably lies there she stands to lose incalculably!"

Even if the Navy planned to do exactly as he wished he would liked to have pointed out that a certain sporting gentleman, Thorne Welchor by name, was in the pay of a jealous power, and had agreed to prevent by strong means, fair or foul, the success of any other air expedition trying to reach the coveted goal first. That Welchor was only a hireling, as well as the success with which he had ingratiated himself into the whole Beckett family, compelled Bliss Eppley now to act with almost superhuman circumspection.

Reasoning thus, and supported by the State Department, he saw that his one chance of success was to convince the naval authorities that his hope to find land in the Polar Sea was not a far-fetched dream at all. The value of an air base near the Pole and its relation to future traffic between Europe and Asia might sway them to see merit in his proposition and detail him as a member of the party picked to go. Then, and only then, could he surely frustrate the ugly scheme afoot and see the Stars and Stripes afloat above the new-found land.

When he reached the Navy Department ten minutes later he found the Committee already in session: five

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admirals, two captains, and a clerk. Admiral Beckett, sitting near the head of the table, nodded curtly to his daughter's choice of a mate. A vigorous man the Admiral was, still in the prime of life. Something of his colorful imagination that had led him first to visualize the enormous significance of the Navy's northern project showed in the keen lines of his strikingly handsome face.

Admiral Buckley, the chairman, introduced the new-comer :

"Gentlemen, Lieutenant Eppley is with us this morning in regard to the subject I have already outlined."

Bliss bowed and took the chair indicated.

"It's rather a wild idea," the Admiral went on. "Matter of history to some extent, I admit. But there's a lot in history that has to be taken with a grain of salt. Correct me if I make a mistake, Eppley."

"Seems that Norway established a colony in North Greenland about 1100 A.D., some time after Eric the Red is supposed to have discovered America. In the sixteenth century this colony disappeared. Norway forgot to send out any ships."

"Pardon me, Admiral," interrupted Bliss, "but it wasn't a case of forgetting. Plague and war swept Europe about that time. Just as in 1914, everything was thrown into the maelstrom of war."

"Mr. Eppley is correct, gentlemen. And I wish to do him the justice of sticking to the facts of the case. Norway let her arctic colony go by the board simply because she didn't have the ships or money to send after them. When the Danes rediscovered Greenland about 1650 the colony had disappeared. I believe there are a few ruins of stone houses left there to-day. But so far as we know the mystery of their disappearance has never been solved."

Admiral Buckley turned to the young officer. "I think, Eppley, that you might go on from there."

Bliss rose. The confidence of a great faith sustained him. He might have been Columbus pleading for his ships. A faint smile played about his mouth. His expression was ineffably eager.

"Gentlemen, it is the greatest riddle in history!"

He paused dramatically. Cynical old admirals and younger captains with the prejudice of their newer prestige leaned forward with interest.

"Think of it! Possibly ten thousand—perhaps as many as a hundred thousand men, women, and children—disappearing overnight, so to speak! The existing archives in Bergen prove they had prospered. For ten generations they had multiplied and grown independent off the rich fiords of Southern Greenland. The Eskimos did not interfere, for Eskimos know nothing of the art of war. Disease is practically unknown in that climate. The happiness we know existed among them precluded any sort of internal strife. They did not sail away for they had no ships; and Greenland has no trees out of which they might have built others. Gentlemen, but one thing could have happened to that great multitude of human beings."

Behind the Admiral hung a large-scale chart of the world. Pointing to it Bliss went on:

"In the vast basin of the Polar Sea there is an area of over 1,000,000 square miles that has not yet been explored. This huge space unquestionably contains a land-mass of substantial size. Tidal currents prove it. Also the seismic axes of the Aleutians and Japan. The center of this land-mass lies northeast of Alaska, and considerably south of the Pole itself. The route between it and the location of the lost Norwegian colony leads along game-infested coasts. . . . I believe, gentlemen, that the Norwegians migrated to this land."

Admiral Beasley, senior member by virtue of his age

and length of service, and thoroughly disapproving of the whole performance, paused in the rolling of a cigarette long enough to shake his snow-white bullet head at Bliss. "No wonder good old-fashioned seamen don't exist these days," he complained in a voice that quavered slightly.

With a reflective motion and the aid of a huge white silk handkerchief Admiral Beckett burnished the tip of his shapely nose, then broke in with a blunt question:

"But tell me, young man, how you can account for such stupidity? Certainly if the Norwegian colonists had been ensconced in South Greenland for eight or ten generations they weren't going to up and leave without good cause."

"Fiddlesticks!" muttered Admiral Beasley irrelevantly. Experience had taught him that wordy argument seldom swerves Youth from the snares of Destiny.

Bliss hesitated. Well he might. For he faced the father of the girl whose life he felt was irrevocably linked with his. And Joan Beckett's parent was no fool, despite his outward bluntness.

"The answer, Admiral Beckett, is that on which I base my whole proposal to the Navy Department. I believe that the Norwegians went north to the new land because they discovered that it had a more temperate climate and—"

"More temperate climate!" ejaculated Bliss' father-in-law-to-be. "What kind of geography do they teach at school these days, anyway?"

But Bliss lost not a whit of his composure. With his ever-ready smile still hovering he went on with slow and scientific precision:

"It sounds incredible, sir, I admit. But there is substantial reason for believing that there exists in the unexplored region of the Polar Sea an undiscovered arctic

continent which is warmed by subterranean heat. In a word a *steam-heated polar paradise!*"

"Sounds like a mental case to me," observed Engineering Captain Middle in a bored tone.

Admiral Beasley for the first time looked pleased. "Right in your line, Middle. Don't you handle steam-heating plants?"

Admiral Buckley tapped the table with his pencil. "It is at least due Lieutenant Eppley that he be allowed to finish," he suggested.

"But, Buckley, have we time to waste on any such nonsense as this?" interposed the Chief of Aëronautics. "You realize that our itinerary for the ZR-5 requires that she attempt the polar flight next month no matter what happens. And our past failures, coupled with the fact that two other nations, England and France, are now striving officially to get across the Pole ahead of us, compel us to devote all our energy to that achievement, and that alone. And while such a sideline as Lieutenant Eppley suggests is doubtless interesting from a purely academic point of view, it can have no practical bearing on our plans."

Bliss leaned forward with a shade of grimness in his tautened lips. "Does it sound purely academic, sir, to remind you that if England's plane, say, by a slight digression, reaches this new land first she will then control forever after all routes across the top of the world both tactically and strategically? Do you recall, sir," Bliss's voice trembled with the intensity of his argument, "that the distance between London and Tokyo, which by the regular routes is 11,000 miles, will be cut 5,000 by the transpolar circuit? Why, in ten years every sort of commerce and travel is going to be diverted to the Polar Sea each year from May to September!"

Admiral Beckett turned from the chart which he had

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been studying. "I understand, Eppley, that your idea is for us to permit you to accompany the ZR-5 as a member of her regular complement in order that you may assist in piloting her to the land you believe lies in the unexplored area of the Polar Sea?"

"Yes, sir." Bliss nodded hopefully.

His questioner faced the Chairman. "Then, Buckley, what is the objection to granting this young man's request?"

Before the latter could reply the Chief of Aëronautics had the floor again. Glancing around with an expression of annoyance he said: "If I may be permitted the liberty of interrupting, I should like to answer that question. There are two perfectly good reasons, gentlemen, why we cannot permit Lieutenant Eppley to foist his romance upon the ZR-5. First, because such a theory is too improbable to keep company with scientific and military endeavor. And second, while I do not wish unjustly to impugn the character of a young officer, I personally believe that it would be better for all concerned if he had nothing to do with the dirigible's plans."

For a moment Bliss could gaze only with astonishment at his superior officer. The color in his cheeks ebbed perceptibly. "What do you mean, sir?" he gasped.

The Chief bestowed a contemptuous smile upon him.

"You mean, sir," asked Bliss in a bone-dry voice, "that some of the confidential things have leaked out?"

The Chief of Aëronautics swept the gathering with a complacent look. "I have my own scouts always out," he observed blandly. "We cannot be too careful. There is too much at stake. It may interest all of you to learn that the secrecy of our plans for the ZR-5 has not once remained intact for as much as twenty-four hours after their being discussed in our private board room. Although Lieutenant Eppley has attended none of our previous

meetings, he is the only one outside the regular Board and officers attached to the dirigible, who has been permitted access to our minutes. Therefore, I am at least compelled to put him in a position from which he may defend himself."

Having delivered this salvo the Admiral sat down.

Then Bliss' heart seemed suddenly to stop. He recalled something Joan had told him in their brief conversation not fifteen minutes before. Her words now dinned in his ears: "*Daddy sits by the hour telling him the plans.*"

Bliss felt stupefied. He was afraid to look at Admiral Beckett. Something told him that Joan's father did not even suspect the truth of Welchor's treasonable behavior. Instead, he must be shuddering at the thought of his daughter associating with such a man as had just been revealed.

After what seemed hours of fearful silence Admiral Buckley reminded the Board that time was flying. "If it is the sentiment of the members present that we simply drop this matter and go on with our other business we can let Lieutenant Eppley go."

A murmur of approval greeted his words.

For an instant a wild impulse seized Bliss to burst out and defend himself against the outrageous implication which must now be unanimously believed: namely, that he was not to be trusted with professional secrets. But the thought of Joan's father stayed him. The Admiral was the soul of honor. Should it come out that he had unwittingly betrayed the inmost confidences of the Navy Department, even innocently and in time of peace, the degradation he would feel would kill him.

Moreover, Bliss realized almost in the same flash that he was playing for a bigger stake than just his personal honor. Who could say? Some day new land in the Polar Ocean might mean the very life and liberty of his

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country. Revealing Welchor and his machinations at this time would result only in the Orientals buying some other rogue, and one perhaps more difficult to snare.

He rose. "I am sorry, sir, that things have gone this way," he said with what dignity he could command. Admiral Buckley did not deign to reply. Bliss turned, and feeling more like a condemned murderer than a patriot dragged his heavy feet out of the room.

CHAPTER III

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THE dilemma in which Eppley now found himself was clearly defined. If, despite his efforts, the ZR-5 crossed the Pole on a direct route to Norway, as the Navy Department planned, she must miss his supposed polar continent altogether. For, if such a land did exist, all available data pointed to its location on the Canadian side of the Point Barrow-North Cape course. On the other hand, if he forced an investigation of his theories about the lost Norse Colony of Greenland, or even of Welchor's plot, public opinion might turn against the Navy's extravagance and demand that the proposed transpolar flight be abandoned entirely. Taxes were growing higher every day. And the press accorded little sympathy to any agitation that savored of intrigue.

There was absolutely nothing more he could accomplish in Washington. To vindicate himself before the Board of Aëronautics meant sacrifice of Joan's father. To attack Welchor with so little direct evidence involved the risk of not only making himself more ridiculed than ever, but of putting the scoundrels on guard against him.

One course remained: To secure leave of absence at once and betake himself to Point Barrow from which the great race was scheduled to start. The trip was bound to be intensely interesting. There would be the excitement of seeing the various hop-offs. He could keep an eye on the plotters. And there was always the chance that something might turn up so that he could make the flight on the dirigible after all.

So before leaving the Navy Department he visited the

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Record Office of the Bureau of Navigation. He was informed that due to his not having taken any leave for nearly three years he could now officially be granted a furlough of two months.

The task of forcing his request through the proper channels occupied less than half an hour. He quitted the building with a feeling of real freedom. For two months at least he would be able to pursue his great adventure undisturbed by the burden of official routine.

At the Club he wired for reservations to Seattle, thence by boat to Skagway and Nome. Also he dispatched an extravagant telegram to a famous outfitting house in New York which had for years kept him in camp gear and travel kit for his various hunting expeditions in all parts of the world.

Turning away from the desk he found himself face to face with a plump bald-headed individual who greeted him with a thumb in his ribs and a chortled:

"Hello, you old lunatic!"

Bliss seized the other's fat shoulders.

"Scotty, you're just the man I'm after!"

McAlford grinned. "Looking for sympathy, old top? They've just told me what that gang in the Department handed you this afternoon. Gee, fellow, but you have gall!"

But Bliss had no ear for bantering. Time was too short. He dragged the puffing Scotty to his room. As Chief Engineer of the ZR-5, Lieutenant Scot McAlford was the one man above all others who must be warned.

"I leave for Alaska to-morrow," he announced when the door was shut.

"Not with us!"

Bliss shook his head a little grimly.

"Couldn't make it. You ought to know if they told you about that session we had this afternoon."

Scotty suddenly rose from the chair he had taken, came over and laid his hand affectionately on his friend's shoulder.

"Look here, old scout, don't make a fool of yourself. There have been rumors now for over a year that you are going dippy on this Polar Flight business. Don't you realize that our aviation gang can handle the thing well enough? It's just a stunt, we all admit. But it's a darn profitable stunt. Why, if we can only jolt private capital into a transcontinental dirigible service we shall have done enough for the country to have repaid the Government fully for its investment in the ZR-5. Don't you remember when we were out in Los Angeles harbor a few years ago and the first Long Beach wildcat came in? Three thousand barrels of oil right off the bat! Easiest thing in the world for the community to grab fortunes off the top of the hill that stood in the middle of their city. Yet not until that second well exploded with a roar we could hear ten miles out to sea and shot gas flames 200 feet into the air did people around get wise to themselves and put up the cash to develop the field."

Bliss smiled sadly. "Scotty, that's the line they all give me. Dollars and cents—dollars and cents!"

"But, man, don't dollars and cents make the world go round? Can't you realize that if the Navy doesn't provide the same sort of jolt to private capital that the Long Beach gas well did we are going to have foreign airships carrying our commerce in a few years just the way foreign bottoms do it now?"

"But you don't understand!" cried Bliss. "All that will come in its own good time. I'm on a far more serious job than business promotion. Scotty, I'm after the most valuable bit of unclaimed territory that lies on the surface of the earth! I stand in a fair way to assure for the United States the most astounding discovery in

all ages! And, as a sideline, I'm after the most dangerous gang of traitors that ever tried to sell their country's name."

Scotty groaned long and loudly, shaking his head like an irritated old bear.

"Oh, you're hopeless—hopeless! For God's sake, Bliss, chuck this insane dream you're having and get a good sea job that will put you back where you belong in the estimation of your friends. Why, the Skipper told me only this afternoon that if you didn't shove off with your absurd hallucinations he was going to see that a medical survey was held on your sanity."

For reply Bliss gave vent to a bitter laugh. During his week in Washington he had been growing hardened to this sort of thing. Indeed, he had heard so much of the other side of the question that he had really begun to see how easy it was for the unconvinced man to believe him crazy. Yet not for a moment had his confidence been shaken. The proofs he had collected through all these years were too substantial.

"Scotty, old man, don't go back on me," he pleaded. "You needn't believe what I say. You needn't even pretend to support my personal reputation. But please, I beg of you, don't for one instant leave either your engines or your fuel unguarded from this day forward!"

At the words Scotty snatched from his mouth the fat cigar he had lit to calm his annoyance at his friend's stubbornness. Through a cloud of acrid smoke he exclaimed:

"My engines! What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Bliss evenly, "despite my alleged insanity, I happen to know that unless the ZR-5 is guarded night and day from now on she will never leave Alaskan shores. Nor will the British, Norwegian, French or Belgian planes get away!"

"But who's to prevent?"

"That I cannot tell you. Not that I don't trust you, Scotty. But I am already suspected by members of the conspiracy. They know that I am the only good American who seems crazy enough to visualize what may be found in the Polar Sea. And they will put me out of the running the moment they find I am working against them. In fact, they would do that already, but they are afraid suspicion might be turned their way if anything happened to me."

McAlford appeared to ponder. A deep wrinkle spread beneath the polished dome of his hairless superstructure. But no gleam seemed to penetrate the fog of his puzzlement. Then abruptly a ray of inward sunshine lit the outward shadow of his expression.

"Say, Bliss," he boomed, "how about some feed? You talk; I eat! What say?"

Bliss smiled. "Sorry, old man, but I haven't even time to sleep to-night. Got to leave by the early train tomorrow. I've persuaded them to give me two months' furlough. That will enable me at least to see the ZR get started across the Polar Sea. And I have an idea that I may, after all, be able to put a kink in the plans of those devils who are on your trail. Also," Bliss added a little wistfully, "if any one falls ill in your gang I may yet be able to go along."

"I hope so, old man," put in the other fervently.

Bliss put out his hand. "So long, Scotty. I've got to say good-by to some one else this afternoon."

The two young mariners gripped hands. And there passed in silence between them something invisible that vouchsafed a loyalty unbreakable. And for the first time since his terrible moments in the Board room an hour before Bliss felt his self-respect thoroughly returned. The faith of a single man of McAlford's rocklike character

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was sufficient to clear his conscience before the world if need be.

Bliss found Joan ready with tea for a visitor. Despite the cordiality of her greeting he noticed something of constraint in her manner. Was it possible that she had changed since her whispered surrender of the morning?

"Good boy!" she exclaimed happily when he appeared; but the next instant glanced anxiously in the direction of the door.

Bliss took swift survey of her trim gown, the appetizing color of her cheeks, the magic of her fleeting smile before replying.

"No, good-by," he corrected.

"Oh!" she flashed back. "You're going?"

"Not with the dirigible, Joan. But I have leave of absence."

Inwardly he struggled with the problem of how much to tell her. Certainly her father would reveal something of the afternoon's disgraceful procedure. And while Admiral Beckett had at first been favorable to the enterprise as Bliss had depicted it, no doubt his opinion must now be biased by the unrefuted accusation of the Chief of Aëronautics.

"Then you're going to see them off?"

"Exactly, old dear. I leave for Alaska to-morrow. It's an interesting trip up the coast, and there is bound to be some excitement at the take-off. You know I saw Alcock make his famous hop from Newfoundland."

The girl clasped her hands. "I'm really glad, Bliss. Because now you will grow to be friends with Mr. Welchor. He is nice when you get to know him."

So the scoundrel had made free with his future movements after all, thought Bliss. Aloud he said dryly:

"I'd heard he's going up; but I don't see what for."

"Why, he has the finest plan you ever heard of! He's

going to have his own plane; and he will be able to follow the others out over the ice when they make their start. Won't that be exciting?"

Bliss nodded. If only he dared speak the truth! Suddenly he had an inspiration.

"Joan, you were expecting some one to tea weren't you?"

"Yes, Bliss, Mr. Welchor himself. He was anxious to see father this evening and asked if he might drop in and wait for him. I was afraid when you came that things wouldn't be pleasant because you dislike him so. Bliss, he really likes you. Did you know that?"

"You don't say so!" Bliss leaned forward and took the girl's hand. "Joan, dear, can I trust you?"

She nodded, a little apprehensive at the sudden fierceness in his face.

"Then I want to tell you several unpleasant truths that you must remember after I am gone. Please don't interrupt me until I am through. And don't judge me harshly until you have had time to weigh what I have said."

The hand in his gave a little pressure of acceptance of his terms.

"This afternoon I went before the Advisory Board of the Bureau of Aëronautics and asked them to let me join the ZR-5 in her transpolar flight next month. I gave them the proofs I had that there is land in the million square miles of unexplored area of the Polar Sea. I pointed out the really fair chance we have of finding some trace of the lost Norwegian colony of Greenland."

"Weren't they thrilled, Bliss?"

"Oh, yes, tremendously thrilled. Your father threw a couple of bricks at me, and the Chief of Aëronautics called me a traitor and a liar before the whole blistering crowd!"

Joan's pretty head snapped up. "That was rotten of them! I'm going to give Daddy a piece of my mind when he returns! I hope you went right back at them, Bliss."

"No, Joan," the words came painfully. "I couldn't very well."

The soft hand was snatched from his. "You don't mean to say that it was true!"

"No—no, it wasn't true. Not even remotely true. But I was in a position that made it impossible to defend myself. I want you to know this because after I have gone you may hear a very different story."

"But, Bliss, think of your professional reputation! A man always owes it to himself to save his character and reputation not only for the sake of his future but for the sake of those who—who love him!"

"But suppose there is a greater thing at stake?"

The girl's eyes widened. "Can there be a greater thing than—than—"

Somewhere a doorbell jangled.

"Yes," said Bliss gently, "there can be a greater stake—even than love!"

Doubt and disappointment swept the comely face he scanned so anxiously as a passing cloud might blot the sunshine from a blossomed meadow.

A maid appeared in the doorway. "Mr. Welchor, Miss."

"Tell him to come in, Janet."

"Listen!" Bliss shot his words with anguished speed. "Welchor's a crook, Joan. He's taking advantage of your father. Do believe me. It's your father that I'm thinking of. Be careful what you say or you will tie my hands. But try to be around when your father talks. You can write—"

With a look of withering scorn the girl brushed sud-

denly by. At the door she stopped and held out her hand to the newcomer.

Thorne Welchor, man about town, cosmopolite, globe trotter and woman fancier, was certainly gifted with personality even though detestable at heart. His manner was full of grace; his grooming was that of a prince; his bearing assured, and at the same time by no means presuming. Yet there was to the discerning eye a hint of furtiveness in his inscrutability; a dash of bestiality in his florid features; a taint of utter ruthlessness in his rather overdone suavity. That he had been able to reach Joan past the hard-headed man of the world, her father, was really a credit to his ingenuity.

"Why, hello, Eppley!" he threw with disconcerting candor at the young officer. "They tell me you aren't going with the dirigible after all." Bliss noted the spark of malice in his smooth voice.

"May I ask who told you the news?" he countered.

With a smile and wink at Joan, Welchor facetiously replied: "Oh, a little fairy, sir. Have you one in your home?"

"But have you heard the real news?" put in Joan, scenting trouble. "Mr. Eppley is going to Alaska, too." Though her tone was conversational a stony glitter in her eyes told Bliss her interest in his fate was, for the time being at least, but social subterfuge.

Had Welchor been struck in the face his expression could not have changed more violently. For half a pulse beat his vaunted self-control completely abandoned him. Joan, smiling on the young officer she had become so fond of, did not catch the older man's sudden surrender to an inner conflagration. But Bliss glancing guiltily up caught squarely the blade of Welchor's dark suspicion.

"Yes," he corroborated the girl's innocent betrayal of

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his plans, "I'm going to Alaska, too. Shall I see you there, Mr. Welchor?"

At the question Joan's look swung back. But before it reached the other's face his crisis had passed, and his former smiling ingratiation asserted itself. With a clever presumption of utter ignorance on her part of anything behind the curtain of the obvious he said courteously:

"Miss Beckett, we two shall combine to keep you informed of all the fascinating preparations and the thrilling details of the start of the greatest race the world has ever known."

Though the speech was coolly made, Bliss's sharp ears caught the deeper menace of its tone.

How completely Joan had missed the truth behind Bliss Eppley's stand against his rival was evidenced at dinner with her father that night.

"Saw your friend the Lieutenant this afternoon," observed the Admiral cautiously.

"He said you did, Daddy." There was a little sharp note in the girl's voice that made the other look up. She met the inquiry in his eyes with a burst of speech that brought new color to her cheeks. "He said something else, too, which changed my mind. I thought I was crazy about him. Now I believe I was mistaken."

"Told you his troubles, did he?" The Admiral's smooth brow became faintly furrowed.

"No. It was the way he spoke of Mr. Welchor. I like Thorne Welchor. I believe he is really in love with me. But most of all I am convinced that he is a gentleman. Never for an instant would he think of saying rotten things about another beau of mine behind his back. Which is what Bliss did." A pout, then a determined thinning of her lips as was her father's habit, attested to the firmness of Joan's words.

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"So you showed him the door?" queried the Admiral with secret elation.

"I showed him more than that. I made it plain that I cannot bear a man who won't play fair."

"Quite right, my charming daughter!" Smiling, Admiral Beckett crunched a hazelnut to bits.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DISASTER

WE LIVE in an age of movement. We travel over the land and under water. Our speed is commensurate with the intensity of our purpose. We dash to trains. We grab taxis. We rush madly for the nearest subway. We telegraph for reservations on the fastest ships. Our whole lives become imbued with a spirit of speed.

In the excitement of departure, Bliss found his swift journey across the continent in keeping with the thrill of the great adventure on which he was embarked. The five days towards Seattle gave him an opportunity to check up on his equipment, to go over the details and figures which had been supplied by the State Department, and to make plans for his stay on the north coast of Alaska, the starting point of the great transpolar flight.

He realized with keen satisfaction that despite the fact he would not have air transportation, which circumstances granted to participants in the race, and to the scoundrels who sought to bring calamity upon these participants, that he still had ample time to reach Point Barrow before the main flight could possibly start.

In Seattle he found the little Alaskan steamer loading at the dock. This delay gave him time to add to his meager baggage a competent outfit of timberjack clothing. The value of this forethought soon was evident. For ten days later in the upper reaches of the Alaskan Gulf cold blasts from the Bering Straits struck down

upon the diminutive vessel and shot an icy screen across her heaving decks.

Through the wind-torn Aleutians, up across fog-bound Bering Sea, and into the black waters of Norton Sound, the little coasting steamer pushed her way. At Nome Bliss got his first sight of the true arctic. The famous frontier town presented a ragged appearance after the misery of its long arctic winter. And the motley crowd of sailors, lumbermen, traders, Indians, and Eskimos that straggled down to the dock gave him some inkling in their weather-worn faces of what he might expect from the rigors of such a climate.

Almost at once the word was noised about that further progress would be impossible. An impassable jam of ice had been brought down from the Polar Sea just to the northward of Nome by a recent northeast gale. Local authorities declared that the ship could make no further progress to the north for at least three weeks. Such a late season had not been witnessed for years. Word had come down from the whaling fleet that ice conditions were the worst that had ever been seen.

Bliss realized at once that in order to assure the success of his own plans he dare not wait for the ship. He learned that a party of reindeer herders, which had been organized for overland crossing, was about to start. He seized the opportunity and joined them. This aspect of the Alaskan country he had not before realized. It brought home to him emphatically the great future of arctic aviation.

"Didn't you know," the head driver, a brawny Dane who had been in the Klondike rush, asked him, "that within twenty years we shall be able to supply the entire United States with fresh meat?"

"You mean reindeer?"

"Assuredly," said the driver. "The original thousand

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animals which were imported only a few years ago as an experiment have increased already to the enormous number of three hundred thousand. From this herd it is estimated that the annual output of carcasses in twenty years will be well above a million."

"A million beeves!"

"Indeed, Mr. Eppley, we shall live to see the reindeer as one of the world's chief sources of meat supply. Already in Norway and Sweden tons of reindeer steaks are eaten every year. Last spring fifteen hundred reindeer carcasses were shipped to New York by way of San Francisco and the Panama Canal. The meat sold as low as thirty-five cents a pound."

Musing on these facts and figures there came to Eppley a thrilling visualization of Alaska the great packing center of North America. As he recalled Seward's check for seven million dollars that Russia once accepted with avidity for her so-called worthless northern province, he smiled. Alaska's gold was not all in her mines. The silver horde of salmon that each spring assailed her shores, teeming reindeer herds grazing upon her limitless pastures, her thickly timbered mountain ranges, all represented a staggering total beyond the power of man to figure.

The two-weeks' sledging trip overland proved an acid test to Bliss's endurance and physical strength. Bitter winds drove across the northern tundra, howled down through mountain passes, and swept the still unmelted snow in swirling clouds about the little party. The hardy drivers took scant notice of the cold; yet like the tenderfoot, they, too, suffered from the wind. Faces of all became streaked with frostbite and turned dark red by endless blustering wind and driven snow.

Down the valley of the Meade River the landscape gradually took on a different aspect. The watershed

dipped now towards the Polar Basin. High mountains became less frequent. Low rolling tundra characteristic of the drifted treeless regions of the "Barrens" spread bleakly northward. Never had Bliss seen so desolate an outlook. No living thing in sight. No birds nor flowers nor vegetation of any sort. For summer heat had not yet brought its brief crop of hardy arctic plants and insects. Over it all hung a low menacing ceiling of heavy gray clouds that from time to time disgorged themselves of fat slow-falling snowflakes.

Bliss had his first sight of the Polar Sea as the little caravan swung down into Pearl Bay just to the westward of Point Barrow. The morning had cleared and the wind dropped. As far north as the eye could see spread the blue-white mass of the great polar pack. Near by huge floes upturned by tidal pressure had flung themselves landward in murderous assault upon the helpless coast. Beyond them long crumbling ridges of gigantic ice cakes marked the limit of the continental shelf. And still beyond, for miles without an end, lay the broad unbroken floes that ground their jagged edges in helpless anguish one against the other, clear to the shores of Europe more than two thousand miles away.

Late that afternoon rounding a sharp headland Bliss found himself suddenly confronted by a large sign on which had been painted the legend:

EAGLE CAMP

Beyond it, he saw what told him he had reached the end of his long hard journey.

All entries for the great transpolar derby had arrived. Just as United States aviators had been permitted to use Newfoundland as a base for starting their transatlantic flight, so now the Government had with proper sports-

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manship granted free hangar space for any foreign adventurers of the air. Their planes had been shipped in sections by the early boat to Nome and their pilots had thence completed the lap to Barrow in a single hop.

Eppley's first impression was the remarkable contrast between the highly organized aëronautic invaders and the original northern community. Skin-clad arctic aborigines mingled with white mechanics dressed in well-fitting Burbury wind-proofs. Eskimo igloos of snow and drift-wood stood cheek-by-jowl with trim little machine-cut cabins of pine and tarred paper. And, most amazing of all, a snarling dog-team stood hitched to a real blubber-loaded native sledge in the lee of a towering structure large enough to house the inhabitants of a dozen such settlements as this. From this enormous edifice, he saw with a thrill, protruding the blunt nose of the ZR-5.

Somehow or other the dirigible looked more gigantic than ever in her new environment. Bliss knew she was over 900 feet long and 120 feet in diameter; and that, despite the miraculous lightness of her integral parts, she weighed over 100,000 pounds. But these enormous dimensions were necessary, he recalled, in order to include her 30 large gas-cells which were filled with noninflammable helium. These "balloonettes" were made of a strange substance known as gold-beater's skin, fabricated from the blind-gut of an ox. To manufacture the single covering before him over one million oxen were represented!

His eyes wandering from the wonderful airship, he noted the relatively diminutive hangars that housed the airplane entries of France, England, Belgium, and Norway. Each he recognized by its national flag. One flaunting the Stars and Stripes he took to be that of the knave Welchor and his gang. This hangar, he observed

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with misgiving, was situated nearest the ZR-5's great shed.

From every hand came sounds of intense activity. Roar of motors being tested, hum of machine tools, shouts of men, and the flapping of innumerable canvas tarpaulins, mingled to create an overtone of relentless determination to wrest the North's last secret from out its icy maw. That men of one race might be ahead of another the crews of individual units were vying desperately to assure.

While his late companions carried his small baggage to one of the native huts in which he had for various reasons determined to quarter himself, Bliss wandered closer to American headquarters. Weatherworn and dirty as he was after his long sledge trip, no one paid the slightest attention to him, apparently taking him for a vagrant native.

At the gaping entrance to the ZR's shed he paused spellbound. Like some tamed mammoth the air giant lay quietly in her refuge while half a hundred men swarmed anxiously over her. Her nose pointed directly northward as if she were impatient to be away.

Every man seemed to be dashing aimlessly about, or pecking with inexplicable annoyance at some part or other of the huge dirigible. Yet well Bliss knew that every officer and sailor in the crew had his particular task to do and his small allotment of time in which to do it.

A bit inside the entrance he spied McAlford talking earnestly to Captain Devon, the dirigible's commanding officer. The latter was a small and insignificant-looking man clad in an oil-grimed denim uniform. Except for his officer's cap a casual visitor would have put him down as a messenger boy, or an ineffectual helper of some sort. Yet of all the best brains and most able naval men who had applied for the coveted command the little Irishman,

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David Devon, had been the only one who fully filled the bill.

"I don't understand it!" Bliss heard him say.

McAlford cupped his hands before replying. "Further aft, you dumb-bells!" he roared upward to the group of pigmy workmen clambering along the leviathan's back. He turned to his Captain. "No, sir, I don't either. Fact, I was up there last night."

A petty officer came up and saluted. "Looks queer to me, Cap'n," Bliss saw him point to the airship's nose. "Right there, 'bout frame four, is another of them cuts." The speaker shook his head. "Wastes time, Cap'n, valuable time, foolin' with such repairs."

Bliss edged a little closer. The moment for making known his presence was certainly of his own choosing. If by picking up a hint or two before any one were aware of his arrival he could gain a better understanding of circumstances, he felt he was well justified in doing so. Anyway, with the gossiping natives about, it was but a question of minutes before the whole settlement would know of the stranger in town. Furthermore, the fact that a white man had chosen to abide with an Eskimo rather than with his own breed would arouse additional curiosity. But he had determined to accept this handicap rather than join the naval contingent among whom he could not hope to be welcome after the disagreeable rumors Welchor had been able to spread about Washington before his departure.

Again Scotty boomed directions aloft. "Now on with your lashings!" He made a graphic gesture. "Good boy!" Bliss could see the men respond nobly on their giddy perch.

"Now a boatswain's chair," prompted the Skipper.

"A line on him!" paraphrased McAlford in lusty tones. The workers twisted and spread as one man crept for-

ward. Then from their midst came a threadlike strand on the end of which dangled a sailor. Breathlessly Bliss watched the dangerous proceeding. Surely this fearless crew earned their stipend for the day's toil.

"Easy! There she is!" bawled McAlford.

Two men at the top stooped to secure the rope which supported their mate in his perilous position. As they did so, from the opposite side of the great shed came a loud cry:

"Fire!"

Bliss' heart leaped. While the helium contained in the ZR-5 was not inflammable he knew there was present in the engine tanks, and in the shed itself, enough gasoline to make a disastrous conflagration.

Practically all the crew were gathered around Captain Devon and the Chief Engineer watching fearfully the dangerous task in which the suspended man overhead was temporarily engaged. Now, at the cry of "Fire!" all dashed to their stations for such an emergency.

On top the dirigible the riggers, having secured the one overside, made their way forward to catch a glimpse of the excitement; possibly to be prepared to do their part, if necessary, to save the precious craft.

His foot lifted in obedience to his natural impulse to join the rush across the great shed's graveled floor, Bliss paused horror-stricken. Along the ZR-5's dome he saw a crouching figure run. At the point where was secured the line by which dangled the unsuspecting sailor the figure stopped. The next instant and rising above the tumult of the fire a piercing scream echoed through the cavernous interior of the great shelter. Slipping slowly at first and clutching frantically at a flimsy shred of canvas near one seam, the doomed sailor slid down over the bulging body of the airship.

With a feeling of utter nausea at the sight Bliss stood

THE FIRST DISASTER

rooted to the spot. He was too far away to possibly have saved the poor fellow. He shut his eyes as with a ghastly thud the body struck.

When the new excitement had calmed somewhat Bliss took rapid account of the strange sequence of events he had just witnessed. First, the fire, which had turned out only to have been a fake: a blowtorch overturned near some excelsior that had been left carelessly about. Second, the incredibly bold attempt to murder one of the ZR's crew, which apparently had failed as the Medical Officer who happened in had at once announced that the man was not fatally injured. And third, Captain Devon's quick notice of the fact that the rope had been cut.

"Looks like an enemy in camp, sir," was Scotty's worried comment.

To which, after a moment of scowling reflection the Skipper had replied:

"Help the Medico all you can, McAlford. I'm going over to see Thorne Welchor. He knows every one in camp and is the only one I trust to advise me in such a mess."

Hearing which Bliss turned away to avoid being seen, and with a heavy heart made his way to his Eskimo friend, Matluk, with whom he had made arrangements to live.

CHAPTER V

THE ENEMY STRIKES

BLISS shared a frugal supper of boiled caribou meat and tea with his Eskimo host. When Matluk had cleaned up about three pounds of the tender venison and had topped off with several lumps of raw flesh, which he lubricated down his throat with strips of white seal blubber, Bliss sent him with a note to McAlford.

Scotty arrived at a dramatic moment. Navranna's baby had crawled over to the little oil stove with an idea of exploring the fascinating yellow flame that wavered above it. Just as footsteps sounded at the doorway the infant emitted a piercing scream. The terrified mother sprang from her couch of skins, knocking over a pot of caribou blood. Bliss tried to avert further disaster by grabbing at the lamp which was teetering on its stand. But his foot slipped in the spreading stream of gore and he landed in a sitting position with little islands of burning oil scattered all about him.

Scotty peered in upon the scene with blinking eyes. Twice he opened his mouth to speak. But speech seemed to fall too far short of expressing his emotions. He stood silent and aghast.

"Come right in, old top!" laughed Bliss. "This is just our little after-dinner game of Eskimo Mah Jongg!"

"Huh?" snorted the still astonished Scotty. "Looks as if some one has *punged* all right, all right! You don't expect me to come into this pigsty, do you?"

"Not if you don't want to. But please be as nice as

THE ENEMY STRIKES

you can about it, because these are particular friends of mine and that morsel of brown putty you see before you is the boarding-house keeper's daughter."

With tears still glistening on its oily cheeks the "morsel" held its arms out to the newcomer.

"There you go!" cried Bliss delightedly. "The ladies always did fall for you!"

Whereupon the big man surrendered with what grace he could manage and with a somewhat gingerly touch mounted the little savage on his knee where she sat smiling and gurgled an unintelligible jargon hopefully into his fat face. Meanwhile Navranna bustled about and reset the stove in order that a cup of hot tea might give the enormous white man a better idea of the native's hospitality.

"Well, you got here, I see," said Scotty, not taking his eyes off the fascinating "boarding-house keeper's daughter."

Bliss glanced through the window toward the little tar-papered shack where lay the maimed body of the unfortunate victim of the afternoon's disaster. For a moment there coursed through his mind a shuddering realization of the extent to which men's avarice will sometimes take them. The injured sailor would never walk again, so the doctor had said. And he had both wife and children. Up to the moment of his fall he had been a happy industrious American bluejacket. Now for the remaining years of his life he must be a ward of the government, his loved ones an object of charity.

"And they think I'm crazy!" Bliss mused. Looking up he said: "Yes, I got here, just in time."

"You sure did," agreed Scotty promptly, missing completely the true meaning of his friend's words. "Two planes ought to get away in the morning. The ZR is all ready except a waterjacket on the fore port engine.

Twelve hours' work perhaps. Things are going to sizzle from now on!"

Seeing a strained look on the engineer's face Bliss suggested a walk up the low hill behind the settlement. "I'd like to have a look around and see the lay of the land," he explained. Scotty accepted the plan with avidity.

"You bet. In fact, I'd like to start now if you don't mind. This perfume your friends have is sort of getting next to me."

On the way up Bliss steered the talk into discussion of what had gone on so far in the camps.

"Just work," puffed the fat man. "Slave drivers we've all gotten to be. The weather is still too unsettled for much flying. But every entry has been able to make at least one test hop out over the ice."

"What do you do in your hours off?"

"They're not many of them. But when we do have a bit of time in the evening we usually go over to Welchor's shack, where he has about all there is in this country to make a man contented. Plenty of tobacco and books and a little music on the side. Once a week he gives us a big feed and has the natives in to sing. He had a whole shipload of stuff sent up on the early boat."

Scotty paused breathless. When his lungs caught up with themselves he exclaimed: "Hang it, I forgot that you and Thorne Welchor are after the same girl!"

"Careful, Scotty," warned Bliss. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

"Don't care if I am! I'm certainly a good enough friend of yours to tell you I don't like the rumor I've heard that you're trying to get something on Welchor in order to further your suit with Joan Beckett."

Dropping behind Bliss fought his anger until he had it under control. Then with studied nonchalance:

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"Has Captain Devon fallen for Welchor too?" he asked.

"Don't like the way you put it," came the prompt retort.

"All right. How's this? Are Captain Devon and Mr. Welchor very friendly?"

"If they're not they ought to be. The Skipper never had a better friend in his life than Welchor. Don't know what he'd have done in the strain of the past weeks if he hadn't been able to turn to some one who really understood and sympathized."

"But don't the other officers of the ZR do that?"

"Of course not. Matter of discipline in the first place. And second, the Skipper is only too glad to be rid of us after sixteen hours of grind through the day."

For the remainder of the climb Bliss was occupied with his own thoughts. Scotty, either through pure breathlessness or because he was thoroughly put out with his friend, plodded along in disconsolate silence.

At the summit of the hill they paused for breath. Spread out before them northward lay the gently sloping apron of the Cape. Perhaps a quarter of a mile away and several hundred feet below them straggled the dirty brown jumble of habitations that marked the village. The plane hangars stood out sharply against their darker background. The huge mass of the dirigible shed towered high enough to cut a rectangular bite from the white ice beyond.

Far into the mysterious north spread the dreary waste of the Polar Sea. Its pressure ridges and old wind-cut bergs were edged with pink from the midnight sun now rolling along the northern horizon. Northeastwards a water sky blurred the deep azure that surrounded it. Directly north hung, like a fairy veil, a faint mist, as if guarding the secrets of the pack.

For a bit both men were silent. Something of the

vastness and the mystery of the Far North for the moment permeated their consciousness; something of the realization of their smallness and their weakness against the immeasurable forces that had created this torn land and limitless sea, both so scarred from exposure to the ruthless elements.

No sound broke the unearthly stillness of the evening. Once a dog yelped. Again the faint throbbing of a native drum told where the superstitious Eskimos were exhorting their queer gods to grant them safety from the innumerable perils of the North.

Bliss drew his binoculars from their case and leveling them against a rock scrutinized the village. Scotty, palpably bored and still uncooled from his recent angry discourse, lit his inevitable cigar and moved nervously about. Suddenly the former turned.

"Scotty, old horse, what *am* I to do!" he cried. "Before I left Washington I learned that Welchor and Scammell were being paid for interfering with the ZR-5 as well as all these planes. The crooks have been promised a huge sum for final success of their deviltry. Indeed, their expenses have been covered to an extent that makes it possible for them to buy not only the friendship and the trust of our officers, but even the honor of the weaker characters among the crews. Their motive is pure gain. Pure selfish profit without regard to its cost to others. Their single object is to wreck all official entries and to make the flight themselves."

"Suppose they do," retorted McAlford. "They are Americans. They gain the glory for the United States if they are across first just as well as the ZR-5 would."

Fumbling in his pocket Bliss drew out a bit of yellow paper and handed it across to his friend. "Read that!" he commanded.

THE ENEMY STRIKES

“‘*Velchorski*,’ ” muttered the other. “What does that mean? Code world?”

“Code word, my aunt! It’s your friend Welchor’s real name! He’s no more American than one of those Eskimos. A good deal less, in fact. He came from Vladivostok in the beginning. He’s got a long record of skulduggery behind him. And he is wanted by the police of three countries!”

“This is good information?”

When his friend did not reply Scotty glanced around to find him frozen in his tracks glaring with a startled expression towards the village. The next instant he sprang past on the trail and set off at a dead run in the direction of Matluk’s igloo.

Even before Bliss reached his dwelling place he realized what must have happened. Having heard of his arrival, Welchor’s gang had undoubtedly broken into his baggage in order to investigate the papers he carried. Fortunately there was nothing that would be of any value to them, save perhaps the marked muster roll of the crews, and some detailed lists of spare parts, fuel requirements, and so on. Such data he had thought it necessary to bring in order to keep himself posted on the conspirator’s probable movements. Anything that might connect him with the State Department he had destroyed or kept sewed in the lining of his coat.

Welchor’s mechanic, Scammell, faced him at the door.

With no pretense at courtesy Bliss met angrily the ugly looks of American, French and British mechanics gathered around.

“By what right have you entered this house? And what are you doing with my papers?” he demanded.

Scammell grimaced as he turned for justification to the rough-clad men about him. “Guess you ought to know, Mr. Eppley. And I think maybe there’ll be some

questions for you to answer when we turn in this stuff we've found in your bag."

In two strides Bliss reached him and snatched the compromising documents from his hand. Taken aback for a moment Scammell stood stupidly and gaped. Then with a thick oath he sprang forward swinging a wicked fist aimed at Eppley's chin. But the blow never landed. With a neat duck Bliss avoided. Uppercutting swiftly with his free hand he lifted the scoundrel at least a foot in the air to fall heavily and half stunned upon the gravel.

Instantly the others rushed in. Whereupon Matluk, with his wife and baby, who had been standing nearby in nervous apprehension, fled precipitately, all screaming the Eskimo equivalent for, "Murder! Help! Fire! Police!"

From every igloo and shack heads began to pop out. Dogs commenced to bark and yelp. The bedlam became general. All of which was natural enough when it is remembered that with the absence of movies, band concerts, balls, and other forms of common entertainment, a good rousing fight was the chief delight of this isolated community.

Shoving the papers inside his shirt Bliss set his teeth and met his adversaries with both fists swinging. A second man went down almost at once. But the blow so overbalanced him that a Frenchman rushing from behind caught him unawares and knocked him spinning. The next moment Bliss also hit the gravel with three husky brutes atop him.

How he would have fared in the bout is a matter of speculation. Fortunately, we may assume, there sounded at that critical moment the sharp command of an officer. At once the attackers loosed their holds and grudgingly abandoned their prey to higher authority. Bliss rose and found himself looking into the irritated countenance of the diminutive commander of the ZR-5, Captain David

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Devon, United States Navy. The recognition was mutual.

"Good evening, sir," said Bliss, saluting. "I'm sorry—"

The Captain held up his hand. "Enough, Mr. Eppley." Turning to Scammell, he said: "May I ask why five men have to attack one? I have gone on record as being in favor of fighting, not assassination."

The bloody-nosed Scammell hung his head. "It's not our fault, sir. He knocked me down and took some papers away from me."

"My own," put in Bliss calmly, and held out the crumpled sheets.

Captain Devon shot them a glance. "What are you doing with these figures?" he asked in quick suspicion.

Before Bliss could reply Scammell blurted: "He's a dirty spy, sir! Names of the crews—!"

"Stop!" roared the Captain. "I won't have any such talk in my camp! Remember that this land is for the time being under my full jurisdiction. You have attacked an officer of the United States Navy. If you have any charges to prefer against him do so in the proper way. Now clear out all of you!" Turning to Bliss he added sternly: "And I shall expect you to do your part in observing camp regulations."

"Aye, aye, sir," murmured Bliss obediently.

Camp regulations with a crook like Thorne Welchor around! The thought was vastly entertaining. . . .

CHAPTER VI

FOUL PLAY

LONG before the sun had begun its upward swing the big camp was astir. Not that the work on the ZR-5 or any of the planes had for a moment ceased since the day before. But tired night gangs now relinquished their tools to their fresh workers and the incessant chattering and hammering and clanking of half a thousand feverish mechanics began anew. For this was the day of days.

Rumor had it that the Frenchman would get off first. But judging from the roar of warming motors in both the British, Belgian and Norwegian hangars, there were going to be some close seconds in the hop.

Without hesitation Bliss made his way towards Welchor's shed. There seemed to be a suspicious absence of activity there. Moreover, he realized that the pair of scoundrels in charge of it would be the focus of whatever villainy might come to pass.

"Look who's here!" yelled Welchor to his mechanic as Bliss rounded the corner of the shack.

Scaumell, with a purpled eye decorating his dirty face, came scowling to the door.

"Good morning, my melodramatic young friend," said Welchor with mock affability. "So you figured you could get away with murder in this camp!"

Bliss prayed for strength to prevent the speaker from committing the real crime with which his metaphor toyed. Aloud he evaded the issue.

"Your mechanic seems to have gathered himself a shiner."

Welchor laughed. "Poor old Scammell. He's not much in a free-for-all. But he's right there in a pinch. Eh, Scam?"

Disregarding his henchman's angry snort he went on: "By the way, Scammell, remember the little skirt I told you about? May be the Missus one of these days."

"Huh!" growled the other. But at a wink from his master he shot a knowing look at the slowly reddening Eppley.

Welchor pulled an envelope from his pocket. "Nice girl, Scam. Peach. Writes a sweet letter too. Listen to this. 'Thorne Dear!' Not 'Dear Thorne,' Scam, old bone, but 'Thorne Dear.' "

A slight sound escaped Bliss. Blood sang in his ears. For a moment he was undecided whether to turn and leave with dignity or stay and knock Welchor's teeth down his throat. As a compromise he said with what coldness his throttled fury would permit:

"You dirty liar, you!"

Welchor sprang to his feet. For several seconds he appeared about to rush the man before him. Then abruptly his head went back and a harsh laugh pealed out. "Oh, hear the puppy bark!" he chortled. "Scammell, listen to the little fellow yelp!"

A sudden booming roar smote the air. The Frenchman's engines had been opened full. Welchor's laughter was swept aside in a new emotion. His face drew taut and hard. His hands clenched. He swung upon Bliss.

"So you're still of the mind you will interfere with me, are you?" he bellowed to make himself heard above the tumult. "All right, you young fool, I'll show you what I can do!" He swept an arm towards the plane now tugging at her moorings. "Watch her!"

Swiftly word flew through the camp that the French entry was ready. Despite the preciousness of time all hands at once knocked off work to see the start. Chagrin tempered their silent admiration as they gathered. For despite their frenzied toil they had failed to win the coveted advantage of being first to leave. Should the French entry make only her designed speed and endurance, ultimate success must attend her pilot's efficiency of preparation.

The weather now brightened to a crystalline incandescence. Facets of myriad ice crystals reflected the brilliant sunshine. For once the great ice pack to northward seemed quiescent. Lazy skua gulls soared gracefully over its nubbled surface. A black spot just beyond the tide crack betokened a fat seal basking in the warm sun.

The French entry was a graceful cruising Fokker monoplane, twin-engined, and equipped with both wheels and pontoons so that she might land on either ice or water. Two pilots sat in her, one behind the other. This was necessary. For despite the average speed of one hundred and fifty miles an hour it was expected the plane would make, the distance of two thousand five hundred miles to North Cape across the top of the globe required an unbroken flight of nearly twenty hours.

The roar suddenly ceased. Final instructions were given. Tired mechanics gave a last swift scrutiny to struts and bolts and wings. A tiny bag of dispatches for the President of France from the President of the United States was handed aboard. Some one darted out with a last word of advice. Captain Devon added a touch of sentiment by stepping in front of the silent onlookers and leading a cheer for the intrepid Frenchmen. As the echoes died away he signaled with his hand to the com-

munity band. There broke upon the crisp morning air the stirring notes of the Marseillaise.

A lump came into Bliss's throat. For a moment he forgot his disappointment that it was not the ZR-5. After all they were human beings, flesh and blood like himself, with hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. After all, he reflected, it would not make any great difference if the Frenchmen won. For the ultimate goal of this great effort was basically man's conquest of the world. Besides, who could appreciate more deeply the glory of such achievement than romantic France? She had not had her fair share of polar exploration. Too many enemies had thronged the pathway of her destiny.

A crescendo of sound effaced the singing. The pilot raised one hand. Slowly the slim plane rolled away from its level, slipped swiftly down with gathering speed, then soared out and up over the great unconquered pack towards the Pole.

A kind of exultation swept over Bliss.

He had failed. The ZR-5 had not been first to start as he had hoped. But the arch fiends whose unscrupulousness he so had dreaded had been unable to stay the heroic Frenchmen.

"You think he's away?" said a sneering voice at his elbow. "Just stay and watch him out of sight!" Welchor chuckled and rubbed his chin. "That is, if he gets out of sight."

He turned to Scammell. "You aren't mistaken about that fellow's carburetor are you?"

"If I am," came the grim reply, "a certain Frenchy'll never see home again. And the best thing is, boss, that he knows it."

"You paid him?"

"Sure I paid him. That's the safest way. Then they

daren't back out. We've got the goods on them, as it were."

While Bliss stood puzzled, scarce knowing whether to believe the words he heard or not, a third man came up. He was a small furtive-looking creature, smaller and meaner looking even than Scammell. He held out to Welchor something that looked like a piece of soap with a dark fuming liquid in a slight depression at its center.

"That right, boss?" he asked.

Welchor sniffed cautiously at the liquid.

"Full strength, Sam?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then. Slap it on the pudding when you get a chance. Only don't tell my friend here."

Sam shot a frightened look at Eppley.

"One of 'em, sir?"

"Thinks he is," sneered Welchor. Turning again to Scammell he inclined his head towards the rapidly shrinking French plane. "About right now, Scam," he said, in what seemed to Bliss a threatening tone. "Remember, old pie-face, you're the goat if she doesn't tumble!"

Scammell bent an anxious gaze upon the fast retreating plane.

"You see, my young friend," went on the other, "we can't let her land too close. She could drop too nicely on this smooth foreshore. And we can't let her get too far out, either. She might pass beyond the limit of the rough floes that lie near the coast, and that way also make a gentle drop to safety. Takes brains, Eppley, takes brains, I tell you."

Bliss could find no reply. What the man hinted was too incredible for belief.

"There she goes!" whooped Scammell suddenly. "I told you so!"

The monoplane had by this time gained an altitude of

perhaps three thousand feet. She was several miles out over the ice pack. As Scammell shouted she seemed to hesitate. She dipped. She took a long curving swoop as if to volplane back to land. Her spinning propellers had stopped. No hum of life was wafted from her powerful motors. They had surrendered to the ingenuity of her enemies. The modified carburetors which had operated so smoothly at the take-off had, at the exact time Welchor intended failed to function.

Like a wounded bird the great plane slithered down. She could not possibly make land. Below her spread a broad pasture of icy débris, declivitous pressure ridges, pinnacled bergs of old up-thrusts, knifelike seracs among the tide-torn smaller floes. Not one square yard of level area for a landing.

Sickeningly she crashed. She capsized. Even at the distance at which she lay from camp her torn and broken wings were visible. She would never fly again. It would take a month to secure another plane. By that time . . .

"Am I right?" said Welchor's malicious voice. "Or am I wrong?"

Bliss did not trust himself to speak. With murder in his heart he watched two distant figures on the ice slowly extricate themselves and stagger landward. Others from the camp ran out in fear and pity to console them.

"And if you're not convinced, perhaps we may arrange another little demonstration. Eh, Scammell?"

Evil satisfaction at the spectacle of his success still lighted Scammell's face. "You mean the little package we parked in Norway yesterday?" he asked.

Even as he spoke a dull explosion rocked the earth. In the direction of the Norwegian biplane rose a cloud of black smoke. Focus of its origin was at the spot on which had stood the gasoline shed of Thorwaldsen the great explorer. In the twinkling of an eye this shed now

disappeared. All that remained was a mass of twisted sheet metal and a drifting dust of fragments.

"The joke of it all," went on Welchor severely, "is that somehow or other the rumor has been going around camp that Thorwaldsen's fuel was not high proof enough to warrant safety. His friends may not now say to him: 'We told you so!' But they will think it. Eh, Scammell?"

Lighting a cigarette he placed it in a long curved holder of ivory and puffed placidly in open contentment at his work.

"Is not my frankness admirable?" he inquired.

Contempt beyond all words marked Bliss' grim reply:

"Nothing is or ever could be admirable about you, Welchor!"

"Ha! Ha! Hear that, Scammell? The puppy still barks!" His face darkened. "Now listen. Time is growing short. Two are out—the French and the Norwegian. This afternoon—a little luck—the Belgian goes. Your bloated dirigible comes last. By that time we shall be ready to leave. Eh, Scammell? But I'm not going to risk my plans by having you around."

The speaker raised a thick finger for emphasis.

"It does not meet my present wishes to harm you, Eppley. Not that I wouldn't enjoy breaking your fool young neck. And I may yet," he added with quick anger. "But at present I prefer simply to get you out of the way. A couple of Eskimos are leaving for Eagle City in the south at noon. You will go with them. Make any excuse to your friends you like for your sudden departure. But if you value your thin hide, go!"

A sudden happy thought seemed to strike the speaker. He showed his teeth in a sardonic smile.

"And by the way, don't bother to look up Miss Beckett when you get back. She is coming up here. She writes that with her father's consent she is learning to

FOUL PLAY

fly. He has been permitted by the Navy Department to visit the camp with one of the Coast Guard vessels as soon as the ice clears. By the time you reach Washington your dear little sweetheart will be smiling at me the way you ought to be this minute." Doubling his fist Welchor shook it threateningly under Bliss' nose. "And just let me add one final item, Eppley. I don't care the snap of my fingers about a lot of things that mean a great deal to you. I have reason to believe that Miss Beckett wouldn't say 'no' if I popped the question to her. And right here and now, before these witnesses, I swear that if you try to return after you leave here, or in any way you make further trouble for me, I'll marry Joan Beckett the minute I get through with this flight! Understand?"

To which Bliss, white lipped, replied:

"No, you damned scoundrel, I don't!"

For which insolence Welchor, losing control, struck him with heavy open palm full across his defiant mouth.

CHAPTER VII

SHANGHAIED!

NOW Bliss Eppley loved a good old-fashioned fight. He was an excellent boxer. And he was graced with that lithe tigerish sort of physique the successful middleweight always has. Welchor outweighed him. But the advantage was mostly fat. Moreover, Welchor's tactics were obviously those of the bully who is motivated more by arrogant assurance of eventual victory, than, as was the case with Eppley, by true joy of the combat itself.

Bliss, half-crouched, advanced with caution, and braced himself for what promised to be a beautiful catapult-like impact of his right fist upon the coarse sneering mouth of the man who had insulted him.

Then a strange thing happened. His crouch became a stoop, his balance an uncertainty. His clenched fists relaxed. His look of intense concentration upon the task in hand faded to an expression of ineffectual and wholly unbelligerent abstraction.

Over Welchor's shoulder he had caught a glimpse of the advancing figure of the creature Welchor called Sam. Sam was returning from the direction of the ZR-5. Sight of him even in this crisis sent a flash of memory through Bliss's mind. Once during the war he had seen used exactly the same soaplike mass which Sam had shown to Welchor fifteen minutes ago. And the mass he had seen during the war had contained acid. Sam's mass had contained something that looked like acid. A fum-

ing liquid it had been. The device had been resorted to in 1917 by enemy spies to put engine boilers out of commission. The bit of putty was simply slapped on the boiler's bottom by an inconspicuous person at an inconspicuous time. Some hours later the contained acid would have eaten through the boiler shell, permitting the hot water and steam inside to sizzle out and carry away the putty. Quietly the boiler would empty itself through the hole—unless the fireman was very much on guard. The fire would warp the dry tubes. And in the space of ten minutes or so the German cause would have one less valuable mechanism pitted against it.

All of which takes time to explain, and for the uninitiated more time to understand. But Bliss's whole mental process of recalling the fiendish device, linking its technic with Sam's soaplike exhibit, and picturing its application to one of the fuel tanks of the ZR-5 in such a way that she would find herself suddenly out of gasoline about halfway across the Polar Sea—his entire cycle of ratiocination occupied about two flicks of the proverbial lamb's tail. By the middle of the third flick he was on his way at a dead run towards the dirigible.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" ejaculated Welchor, with something of relief. "I thought the puppy had more guts than that!" Which shows how appearances sometimes deceive. For almost by the time the words were out of the bully's mouth Bliss had drawn up sharply near the ZR's shed and gasped to one of the crew:

"Where's Mr. McAlford?"

Not a thought of Welchor's threats. In fact, they had gone in one ear and out the other. The one vital thing now was to get hold of Scotty and insist that he immediately inspect every fuel tank and engine jacket for the small pat of soaplike putty that might end forever the ZR's chances of reaching her destination.

The big dirigible had been drawn out of her shed. By a score of lines she was anchored to the level space between her stable and the sea-ice. In the light northerly breeze she tugged gently at her moorings. As if the divine spark of life had entered her vast bulk she lifted and quivered against the ropes that held her.

The man pointed aloft. "Forward control car, I think, sir."

Bliss dashed for a rope ladder that dangled near by. Up its swinging rungs he clambered. A mechanic started forward as if to head off the grimy creature that had so suddenly taken the liberty of boarding his beloved airship. But something in Eppley's prodigious haste checked him. He glanced around for a pursuer. When his surprised gaze swung back the trespasser had disappeared into the hatch overhead.

The cavernous interior of the dirigible contained the thirty balloonettes, or gas-bag units filled with helium, which provided her lifting force. These bags were of silk and arranged symmetrically within the aluminum framework over which the outer sheath of gold-beater's skin was drawn. So enormous were the craft's dimensions that the elements of her metallic skeleton shrank in perspective to a fineness comparable to that of the fragile web of a butterfly's wing. It seemed as if the sheer weight of her gossamer covering must crush the frail structure underneath. Yet so ingeniously had the tiny rods and struts been joined that every ounce of pressure was distributed throughout the length and breadth of the delicate skeleton. And so masterly had been man's development of the patent metal duralumin, from which her main supports were forged, that the fiercest gales had so far failed to harm her.

Between the gas bags stretched a narrow runway leading the entire length of the ship. Standing upon this,

one had the sensation of having entered a vast warehouse whose doming roof towered a hundred feet overhead. Contents of the warehouse were bulging gray globes of mammoth size which, though soft to the touch, gave the appearance of inner firmness.

From far up among the silver threadlike rafters came the tap-tapping of a hammer. Echoes ebbed and flowed with musical cadence through the immense hollow cave below.

Pausing for an instant with a thrill of amazement at the strange atmosphere in which he found himself, Bliss swept the marvelous sight with boundless admiration for the almost superhuman skill and ingenuity that had made the ZR possible.

Then the burden of his mission pressed him on. Stepping gingerly at first along the limber runway he soon found its strength like all else thereabouts was not in keeping with its length and breadth. He broke into a run. A hundred yards ahead, glimmering through the subdued light, he saw the flicker of reflected sunshine where a hatch was open. There must he find Scotty and warn him of the terrible danger Welchor's infernal scheme presented.

At the hatch he paused thunderstruck. The ground which, when he had climbed the rope ladder but a few moments before, had been but a score of feet below the belly of the dirigible had now fallen away to at least double that.

A loud explosion made him start back, clutching the hatch lid in nervous dread. Followed a swiftly increasing series of lesser concussions that he realized at once was the starting of one of the ZR's powerful twelve-cylindrical Swik engines.

A wild anxiety seized his mind. Had Captain Devon been able to push his preparations faster than the camp

had been led to believe? Was the ZR-5 really going to get away to-day after all? She had been withdrawn from her shelter. She had only in the past two minutes been permitted to rise from her moorings to a height that Bliss knew was usual for embarkation.

His movements became jerky with apprehension. With a glance of dismay he saw that the ladder at this point had been lowered and housed on the roof of the control car just below. It would do no good to shout. Roar of all six engines forward now split the air with a deafening noise.

He turned and sped towards the aperture through which he had first entered the ZR's interior.

The rope ladder had disappeared. In a panic he knelt and peered out. Just below and aft of him was swung the radio shack. Through its tiny window he saw the operator bending over his key. The man wore helmet and a pack on his back. The pack, Bliss knew, contained a safety parachute. The helmet was an item of cruising equipment. The use of the key could mean only one thing:

The ZR-5 was about to leave!

Half stunned Bliss sank unsteadily to a sitting posture. His eyes sought the ground. It rested unmoving in his vision. If the dirigible had not yet left there was still time to call a halt. Still time for him to announce his presence and warn the commanding officer of the reason for his impetuous visit.

He sprang to his feet. He lowered one leg over the hatch coaming. By clambering down on the roof of the radio car he would be in a position to signal to the men he now saw standing by the mooring bollards that ranged in a long ellipse under the airship's body.

Then like flame temptation seared his mind.

Suppose he didn't signal them! Suppose he hid! Sup-

pose in the feverish excitement of departure his presence were overlooked! Suppose he seized his obvious opportunity and became a stowaway on the greatest voyage of exploration the world had ever seen!

His thoughts raced. Came to him in a torrent all his dreams of a great Polar Continent that should be added to the territorial empire of the United States. All his visions of a lost race inhabiting that continent. All his fierce ambitions to be among the first to discover and explore it. All the injustice of circumstance that had militated against his joining the ZR-5 in her great adventure. Why shouldn't he go? Had not Destiny conspired by this very series of incidents this morning to assure his presence aboard at the start?

Then in the next breath and like the ebb of a storm-driven tide his sudden ecstasy fell away and joy drained from out his heart. Came to him a realization of the fabric of his life. Honor the keynote of his profession. Integrity the backbone of his trade. Religious adherence to the spirit as well as to the letter of the law the dominant characteristic of his position as a naval officer and a gentleman. What profit the thrill of great adventure when in one wholly unnecessary surrender to temptation he swept trustworthiness from his name?

A quiver ran through the frame on which he stood. The men below were with energetic movements casting off their lines. The ground on which they danced like so many monkeys appeared to slide from side to side as the freed after-body of the dirigible swayed in the wind.

To escape or even make his presence known that way was no longer possible. And while his hesitation had been but a matter of seconds those seconds might make the difference between safety and disaster not only for the crew that had so quickly manned their ship, but for the whole vast enterprise on which she was embarking.

He leaped about and again ran madly for the forward hatch. He must, no matter what the cost in temporary delay, warn the Skipper or the engineer of the peril that they faced. Even though it involved a certainty of being ejected from the ZR-5 there was no other solution to the dreadful problem.

In the brief space of that last wild race there flashed across his mind the other complications that he faced. Welchor would stop at nothing to eliminate him from the neighborhood. If, as the scoundrel had declared, Joan were really coming up by the next boat she would arrive within the week. Who would be there to protect her? Yet, on the other hand, if he stayed with the dirigible did not there lurk a chance that his seeming perfidy might be forgotten in the glory of her exploit and he be able in the end to claim his girl with the substance of achievement she deserved?

To his horror he found the hatch had been closed and bolted. He flung himself upon it. With bleeding knuckles he tore wildly at the fastenings. To his joy he found he could move them. Sweat streaming from his face, he wormed them loose one after another. Damn Welchor! The acid patches once discovered could be quickly removed. There would not have been time for them to have eaten through the metal.

Three bolts loose. One bolt left. It stuck. Sobbing he found his bruised fingers could do no more. In a frenzy he glanced about for some sort of tool. Nearby lay a small fragment of metal. He pounced upon it. He jammed it under the recalcitrant bolt.

Roar of all engines deafened him. But there was no perceptible movement of the dirigible. She had not yet started. There was still time. He would leap upon the control car; wrench the helmsman away; demand cessation of the start until his message was delivered. He

SHANGHAIED!

wouldn't win the prize for which he'd toiled and dreamed and planned. But he would keep unsullied the honor that he boasted.

The last bolt was loose. But the hatch still stuck. Tears streaming down his cheeks he pounded the pitiful wreckage of his hands upon it. He sprang to his feet and kicked it first on one side and then on the other. He ground his teeth in a fury of baffled energy.

Then his eye caught the item he had overlooked. On the side opposite the hinges and just under the small overhang was fixed an inconspicuous safety catch. In a flash he snapped it clear. The hatch sprung loose. With the cry of an animal he swung it up and looked out. He swayed giddily and nearly fell. He clutched with bleeding fingers and saved his life.

Below him, half a thousand dizzy feet below, he beheld the white and tumbled surface of the polar pack. Swiftly it sped by him as he looked.

The ZR-5 was off!

CHAPTER VIII

TOWARD THE POLE

THE forward control car of the ZR-5 swung on the center line of her underbody about a third of the distance between her nose and tail. It was nearly a hundred feet long and had about double the beam of an ordinary Pullman coach. It was divided into four cabins or compartments. First of these was the pilot house, which in its contents and equipment differed little from the pilot house of a steamship. The second division constituted two-thirds of the whole and provided a luxuriously fitted wardroom or saloon for the officers of the dirigible. Next came the officers' galley. And finally, the sleeping quarters, which were, in fact, nothing more than a dormitory with canvas-walled cubicles.

Near the airship's stern hung a second car of approximately the same size as the control car, but divided athwartships by a single partition. The forward half was both living and sleeping space for the crew of forty men; the after half a combined workshop, storeroom and laboratory.

On either side and outboard of the center line of the underbody were swung three small egg-shaped structures each containing one of the ZR-5's powerful engine units. At the after end of each of these "engine-eggs," as they had come to be known, spun a gigantic four-bladed propeller. In order that the tremendous wind currents from each propeller might not reduce the efficiency of that just

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astern, the engine-eggs were staggered; that is to say, placed alternately out and in along the ZR's bilge.

The only other outside structures on the dirigible's body were a small lookout station in her nose, the tiny radio house between the two main cabins, and a long narrow walk fore and aft upon her very summit.

All communication between the various units was by means of the runway inside the ship's body which Bliss had used. This was an essential feature in her construction as it enabled the crew and officers to pass continuously going on and off watch, as well as in making the innumerable inspections required for safety of the whole craft.

Captain Devon stood in the pilot house puffing at a stumpy pipe and gazing intently out of the window towards the northern horizon. From time to time he studied the multitude of dials, gauges, and other patent indicating devices with which he was surrounded. Like the helmsman and McAlford he wore across his shoulders the small cruising pack which contained a safety parachute. At sea one may jump into a life preserver at short notice and feel sure to beat the swiftest disaster that may overtake the water-borne vessel. In the air no human action is quick enough to prepare against the unwarned awfulness of gravity let loose upon the human body. So while the ZR-5 was of latest design and contained the greatest possible safety for her passengers not only in the noncombustibility of her helium but in the incredible strength of her structures, existing regulation required every man aboard her to wear at all times a folded parachute strapped upon his back. Thus at the first flash of peril might the wearer leap clear of the doomed ship and float in safety to the earth beneath. In the present instance not only did the parachute bag contain umbrella and leading cords, but also reserve rations for three days and a complete first-aid kit.

ZR WINS!

"A shade over ninety," murmured the Skipper. Ninety miles an hour! Whizzing through the calm clear air. Sunshine smiling. The pack below growing leveler with every hour away from land. The Pole a scant thousand miles ahead: Not ten in the morning yet. Barometer steady. Every omen portending success. The Top of the Globe by midnight! North Cape in the morning. How the wires would hum! The very air this time to-morrow must reek with radioed plaudits from the entire civilized world for America's second planting of the Stars and Stripes at the Apex of the Sphere!

"Twelve-hundred—twelve-fifty—a good altitude, McAlford."

Scotty glanced through the window at the solid ice far down sweeping in silent swiftness under the racing airship. Twelve hundred feet up: a splendid altitude for speed!

The Skipper joined him, and peered under hooded eyes to the north. He shook his head. A grimness firmed the clean-cut contours of his jaw.

"A little luck, McAlford, and they've got us."

Scotty scanned the blue distance for some sign of the speck that would indicate they might be overtaking the Belgian plane which had hopped off almost at the very instant the ZR-5 had.

"Hardly a chance, sir. Unless she smears herself up the way the Frenchman did."

"Or has what all these racers suffer sooner or later, a radiator leak."

"You mean you think she'd stop on the ice for water?"

Captain Devon glanced across the row of flickering gauges. Picking a telephone from its hangar he punched a call bell.

"Of course they would. . . . Hello, engine six? Captain speaking. Your revolutions are down. . . . Yes.

. . . Well, remember it's a strain on the vertical rudder." He slammed the receiver back. "Guess I'm a little jumpy after the past week, McAlford."

Scotty shot an admiring glance at the indomitable little man.

"I should think you would be, sir! I've had a few bad dreams myself." He crossed over and lowered his tone.

"Did you ever have a talk with Eppley, sir?"

A shade of annoyance crossed the Skipper's tired face. He bit viciously on the pipestem between his teeth.

"I—"

A bell jangled loudly. Flipping the cover of a magnavox telephone with an angry gesture he paused to acknowledge the call.

"Plane approaching from the south, sir! After lookout speaking."

"Must be the Limey!" burst Scotty.

Indicating a slight change of course to the helmsman, "Or Welchor, bless his old heart!" countered Captain Devon.

As the ZR-5 swung over a point a black speck above the low brown line marking the fast-disappearing coast of North America confirmed the lookout's report.

Unable longer to contain himself, "Ten dollars it's Welchor!" cried the Skipper with unbecoming asperity.

"Done, sir!"

The speck grew. . . . Widened. . . . Became a bird. . . . A large angular bird with wings, one above the other. . . . Became a biplane. . . . Glint of sunshine reflected from its whirling propellers. . . .

"She's coming fast. Must be making a hundred and fifty if she's making an inch, sir!"

The Skipper swung his glasses upon the onrushing plane. His tongue clicked. Twice he made as if to speak. But, being a man of habitual caution he forbore

to proclaim an opinion without positive assurance of its truth.

"I knew it!" he cried suddenly. "I told you it was Thorne! Good old scout!"

"Wait!" protested McAlford. "It looks to me—"

"Hanged if it don't!" broke in the Skipper disappointedly. "It is the Limey! Doggone it! Thorne told me he'd be away at ten. Well, let's give the Britisher a wave." He flung down the side sash. A violent gust of wind struck him with such force that he staggered back into Scotty's arms. No longer soundproof now that the window was open, the control car became a caldron of sound as the roar of the ZR's engines poured in.

The British plane drew alongside. Her lines and type were the same as Welchor's. But on her lean racing body she carried in bright colors the imperial emblem of her nationality.

Her pilot half rose in his seat. A grin of friendly exultation underlined his bulging goggles. Behind him his relief emerged suddenly from the engine cockpit. Both waved their arms wildly.

"Good boys!" involuntarily bellowed Devon, without the slightest hope of making himself heard above the immeasurable wall of thunder between him and his rival. The Englishman also opened his mouth and bawled words that were lost except for the happiness their parent seemed to feel upon their utterance. . . .

Sportsmanship no words can well describe! The clean zest of contest unsullied by human folly, lust, or hate! A glorious race! A game for supermen! The whole world breathlessly awaiting the result. . . .

The British entry drew away. Then suddenly was visible what neither watcher from the ZR-5 had seen before. From just under the plane's fuselage, about on line with the engine's crank case, a black thread seemed

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to dangle. Ten feet below, this thread disintegrated into glistening ebony drops of lubricating oil that fell in a wind-spattered stream to invisibility in the abyss beneath.

With a jerk Scotty closed the window upon the awful tumult without.

"Did you see it?" he burst.

The look on the Skipper's face was sufficient answer. He nodded.

After a moment, "McAlford," he said, "that fellow has a crank-case leak sure as sunrise. He's a goner. He may last a hundred miles. Maybe two hundred. But he's doomed to land helpless out here in the Polar Sea before midnight. He'll freeze or starve or drown. Not a chance in a million we'll pick him up. Of course we'll stop if we see him. But—"

Jangled again the lookout bell. This time the forward one.

". . . on the ice ahead, sir," Scotty half-caught the message.

"Down, half rudder," ordered the commander in a strained voice.

As the airship dipped there came visible north and east from her position what seemed to be a black smear on the ice. The ZR was headed for it. Engines were slowed as she elbowed her way down through the lifting air.

"What did I tell you?" said the Skipper.

But both men soon saw that it was not the Britisher in trouble, as had been their first thought, but the Belgian. The peculiar cut of the airplane's wings and the brilliant blue enamel of her body made recognition easy.

As the ZR-5 settled towards the ice pack her commander gave a sharp order to slow all engines. Gauges flickered and the roar outside perceptibly diminished. With pro-

pellers just turning over to keep her skillfully hovering twenty feet above the Belgians Captain Devon shouted his offer of assistance.

"Radiator leak," the discouraged pilot yelled back. "Stopping here for water. Maybe we can fix her. You are a fine gentleman, Capitaine Dee—von, so to stop. But you must not waste precious time."

"He's a sport, all right!" exclaimed Scotty.

"Very well, old man," returned the Skipper. "I like your nerve. Wish you luck. *Au revoir*."

"*Au 'voir, mon capitaine!*" chorused the Belgians and bravely waved and smiled as the shadowing monster over them lifted slowly and gathered speed again.

McAlford, a little thoughtful, closed the window upon the tumult without. Neither man spoke. Arrows on the speed dials moved slowly back again close to the hundred-mile mark. A monosyllable now and then from the helmsman as the gyro compass swung imperceptibly from the lubber's line.

Minutes passed. Relaxation seemed impossible.

Suddenly Captain Devon turned upon his chief engineer.

"McAlford, you mentioned Eppley."

Scotty looked up quickly. Was it possible that the Skipper had come to the same conclusion as himself?

"Yes, sir. I mentioned him because I wanted you to know that he feared conspiracy against the ZR-5."

With an angry gesture Devon removed his pipe and used it to punctuate his words.

"McAlford, if you mention that foolishness again I don't know what I'll do to you. I was thinking of Eppley's theory about there being land out here."

McAlford ignored the threat. "But there is no sense in our being blind to circumstantial evidence, sir," he persisted with asperity.

"What do you mean?"

"That we should be blind fools not to realize that up to the present moment every entry save ourselves and Welchor has failed or is about to fail. The Frenchman's crash—"

"Too much haste," snapped the Skipper.

"The Norwegian's fuel explosion—"

"It was common gossip that his proof was too high."

"The Britisher's oil leak and—"

"Absurd!"

". . . and the Belgian's radiator gone to pot," Scotty went on unmoved. "Don't you see how, when they're all joined up together, it looks like underhand work?"

Captain Devon threw up his hands in token of utter refusal to accede to such views.

"It doesn't make sense, McAlford. . . . Steady, there!" The helmsman reconcentrated his attention on his compass. "When the time came for us to make the transatlantic flight from Newfoundland in 1919 we were accorded every possible courtesy. It is now entirely proper that the United States should do the same to other countries that wish to make the transpolar flight."

The engine dial on number three suddenly swung to zero. McAlford catching the movement with a watchful eye sprang to the tube. The dirigible, for the moment under an unbalanced impulse, swung off her course. The helmsman met her with sharp rudder.

"Don't care!" bawled the chief to his henchman far aft. "Slam it into her! That's the third time in an hour you've slowed!"

The dial swung back.

"That's the baby!" encouraged Scotty, his voice losing its tenseness.

Captain Devon stepped over and laid his hand on his engineer's shoulder.

"Doesn't it penetrate," he said almost pleadingly, "what I've been up against all these weeks? Scarcely a waking moment that I haven't had to coax or drive or damn some man or mechanism. Washington couldn't give me money enough. Men were scarce. The criticism of the Navy by the whole American public would have been my fault if we had failed."

"But why will you shut your eyes to what is, sir?"

"Simply because Eppley's theories were so wild that they set me against all he said or did. When he hinted to you that there was a plot afoot to damage these planes, and the ZR-5 as well, he was simply voicing his subconscious desire to have things fall his way and make it possible for him to join us under some pretext or other. Thank heavens we are rid of him! I think if I had had to stay around the camp another day and even see him I should have been sorely tempted to do him bodily harm."

"But suppose," persisted the mulish Scotchman, "that later on it turned out that there was really something in what he claimed?"

"Stop it!" cried the other. "If you want to think fool thoughts and believe fool things and altogether act a fool yourself go right ahead and do it! Only don't foist your insanity on me. I repeat that I think Eppley is crazy and nothing would please me better than never to set eyes on him again! Understand me, McAlford?"

The commander fixed his chief engineer with a baleful glare. But for reply to his outburst he received only a wild expression of utter incredulity. McAlford's eyes literally bulged from their sockets.

In perplexity Captain Devon swung about to find himself face to face with the unkempt but flesh-and-blood object of his anathema: Lieutenant Bliss Eppley, United States Navy.

CHAPTER IX

A CLOSE SHAVE

IN DESCRIBING the incident to his messmates when he came off watch the helmsman dwelt particularly on the evidences of incipient explosion that marked the bearing of his commanding officer at Eppley's dramatic appearance.

"First, the old man turned pink! Then he turned white. Then sorta green. Gosh! I thought he was going to fall down and throw a fit then and there! And the chief wasn't much better. Made funny sounds in his throat. I figured for a minute that he'd swallowed his cigar. And that Eppley, the lieutenant you know, never turned a hair! Just stood there and looked kind of mad as if he was expecting to get slugged and was going to give back good as he got the minute any one started on anything."

Which really wasn't quite accurate as far as Bliss was concerned. For his state of mind was far too agitated to think of combat.

"What does this mean?" finally choked the Skipper.

"I had no intention of going with you, sir," explained Bliss lamely. "I came aboard only in order to see McAlford and to tell him about his tanks."

"What's the matter with my tanks?" exclaimed Scotty.

Captain Devon, not taking his eyes off the stowaway, snapped:

"Nothing's the matter with them, McAlford. Just some more of this lunatic's hallucinations!"

"Not at all, sir!" cried Bliss. "I am positive that if

you inspected them now you would find out they have been tampered with. Maybe Welchor—”

The Skipper held up his hand for silence. “None of that! I will not listen to the absurd stuff you have been ramming down your friend’s neck here. It’s too late to put you off. We have gone too far. I shall settle your case when we get to land. In the meantime consider yourself under arrest. Confine your movements to the wardroom. Understand that your conversation with others is not to be on any subject that pertains to your absurd claims and suspicions. You are to visit neither the engines nor the pilot house while you are here.”

“But, Captain,” protested McAlford, “don’t you think you ought to listen to his reasons for coming aboard?”

“I certainly do not. The reasons he is here are very evident to me. Eppley is and has been exceedingly anxious to make this trip. I cannot blame him for that. But when his desires carry him to the point of such unofficer-like behavior as making himself a common stowaway I cannot treat him as an officer, and I do not wish to give him the opportunity to do any damage to the morale of my men while he is with us.”

A look of desperation crept into Bliss’s worn face. “You refuse even to investigate my suspicions, sir?”

“Absolutely. There is nothing on which you could found them. And I will not believe for a moment—”

The sentence was never finished. At that instant the dirigible swerved suddenly and without warning from her horizontal course and swung dizzily downward at an angle of forty-five degrees toward the ice field below. Since falling in with the Belgian she had been cruising at but a few hundreds of feet above the floes. This with the momentum of her tremendous speed made a crash inevitable.

McAlford sprang to the telegraphs. “Stop all en-

gines!" he bellowed, not waiting for acknowledgment at the other end.

Captain Devon shot open the general alarm. The helmsman yanked feverishly but without profit at his levers. Bliss braced himself in dread anticipation of what seemed unavoidable destruction of the dirigible.

The roar of the engines ceased almost at once. But the ZR-5 continued her suicidal swoop towards the ice. It seemed as if nothing could save her.

Impulse gripped Bliss to scream, "I told you so!" Could this be aught but Welchor's work? In the next half second of sickening horror there flashed across his mind the damning realization that the rudder of all places was the ZR-5's most vulnerable spot. A trick of utter simplicity would cause the mechanism to jam at a critical moment and drive the great dirigible to her death among the marble bergs.

Less than a hundred feet from the soaring pack Captain Devon gave an abrupt exhibition of his steely-nerved resourcefulness that the Navy Department long ago had recognized as one of the chief characteristics of this officer. Not wasting time to give an order he sprang like a tiger to the helm and sent the man there spinning. Seizing the vertical rudder control with both hands, and with an effort that turned his sweating countenance purple, he wrenched the contrivance hard over.

Instantly the ZR answered. So suddenly, indeed, that all were thrown heavily to port as she lunged sidewise. Whence, as Bliss afterwards realized, centrifugal force was given a chance to seize the huge body and roll it over in the same way a vessel at high speed heels when its rudder is put sharply right or left.

With a sickening rending crash the dirigible struck the ice. One engine-egg was torn clean from its moorings and rolled with a dreadful clattering among the nubbles.

A corner of the control car struck the sharp pinnacle of a floe edge and ripped the inner girder clean out for a length of twenty feet.

But Captain Devon's presence of mind had saved his ship. For the heel she took at the instance of her sudden hard-down helm had enabled her to roll nearly halfway over. So that, despite her headlong dive to the ice, she struck not upon the solid understructures but on her more elastic side. Except for the wrecked engine-egg and minor damages to the control car and starboard sheath she was quite unharmed. She bounced twice after the first concussion, which completed the demoralization of her terrified crew. But she was far from being the wreck every man aboard her had pictured during the awful moments of her fall.

With trembling hands Scotty began to fumble in his pockets for a cigar. Two he pulled out were tattered beyond recognition. The third still retained an inch of substance. Lighting up he turned to Bliss and said:

"Well, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, if we don't find you vindicated now I give up!"

"Pooh and fiddlesticks!" snorted the Skipper. "I can guess the cause of this accident without even looking at the rudder!"

Finding the port door jammed shut by the collision he led the way to the control car's roof from which all three clambered to the glistening surface of the ice.

The boatswain met them. "Jammed rudder, sir! Horizontal rudder. Threw us right into the—"

"You don't say so!" interrupted the Captain sarcastically. "Did you think we imagined she did it of her own free will?"

"No, sir. But—"

"*Why* she jammed—not the jamming, boatswain, is what we want to know."

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The fellow turned beet red. "Oh," he murmured shamefacedly, "if that's what you want to know, sir, I think you'll find we snarled a bit o' mooring hawser in her after strut."

"Hum. Harumph! . . . So that's it. You didn't tell me in the first place because you thought you'd lead me astray with that other line!" He turned to Bliss. "Are you satisfied?"

"Not unless I see it, sir," was the obdurate reply.

The Skipper shrugged. "Oh, very well. Call everybody a liar, why don't you?"

"Never thought of such a thing, sir!" came the angry retort.

McAlford elbowed his way between the two. "Look here, sir, I believe we ought to take time to make a thorough inspection right here and now. No telling what damage we may have done by this smash-up. And I still believe some attention ought to be paid to Eppley's suspicions."

Captain Devon threw up his arms in total surrender. "Go on, then, you pair of calamity-howlers! If you'll feel any better for it, McAlford, go and give her the once-over. But be snappy about it. I intend to start in fifteen minutes unless the after body is more sprung than I think now."

Scotty turned on his heel. But before he had taken two steps towards the nearest engine-egg a grimy figure swung from the main middle hatch leading to the ZR's inner body and came running at top speed. Just before he reached the chief engineer he seemed to recognize his boss and tried to stop. The net result of his effort was promptly to lose footing on the slippery surface and hurtle with almost undiminished velocity towards McAlford's underpinning. The next second the latter was seated comfortably atop his assailant and puffing con-

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templatively at his ragged cigar. Undaunted, the victim beneath him made no attempt to rise but cried:

"It's absolutely empty, sir! Absolutely. Took a sounding. And—I tell you, sir, it—"

Placing his heel on the excited speaker's chest McAlford commanded him to be calm. "Slowly, Ives, one at a time, old scout. What's empty?"

"After tank, sir. Got a hole in it, sir! Little round hole! I looked 'em all over just before we left. Not a chance it was there then."

Bliss cocked an ear. A little hole? Wasn't there when she started? A *little* hole! In a leap he was at his friend's elbow.

"That's exactly what I came to tell you!" he cried. "It's the old wartime acid trick! Quick! Maybe there are others." Not waiting for the bewildered McAlford to reply he set off at a run for the fuel tanks which were clustered aft between and above eggs 4 and 5.

Three minutes later the truth stood revealed: Before the very eyes of the doubting Captain, Bliss removed three small pats of putty from the ZR's tanks of precious fuel. Acid from two had eaten so far into the metal that gasoline oozed out when they were taken off. The third one was luckily more spread; but even it had engraved an irregular pitted spot of corrosion on the smooth sheet metal.

Bliss wiped his hands. "Half an hour more, sir, and she'd have been spraying the whole ice pack with gas!"

Captain Devon did not deign to reply. His brow furrowed by a thoughtful frown; he studied the damage closely. He ordered that all men who could be spared from the temporary repairs being made upon the control car be sent at once over the dirigible to scrutinize her carefully not only for possible damage but in order to

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ascertain if any more "infernal machines," as he put it, could be found.

It was characteristic of the little man that once convinced he let no personal vanity stand in the way of justice. Quickly he called the crew around him.

"I want you beggars to look at this!" He held up one of the putty containers of corrosive acid. "Some damn skunk has tried to put us out of commission! He came all-fired close to it, too. You're a hot lot of keepers, you are! Now, over the top with you! You have fifteen minutes to cover her. If you find a single thing that looks suspicious pass the word down here to me so I can come and have a look. Every second we lose may mean the race. Now *jump!*"

Turning to Bliss he held out his hand. "It's a hard life, Eppley, if you don't weaken. Guess you've the right stuff in you, all right, not to have weakened after all you have been up against. I'm just about ready to eat my words after what we've found here. However, I still don't admit my friend Welchor had anything to do with this rottenness. But some one did it. And you certainly did your durnedest to put us wise!"

"He did, sir!" put in McAlford enthusiastically. "Worried the life out of me with his threats. Yet even I thought they weren't much more than bilge water."

The Skipper crammed his pipe bowl full and grinned. "Here, cookie," he called to a Filipino peering anxiously through the after galley port, "let's have about a gallon of nice black Java in the control car. Speed her up, too!" Backing off in order to see the upper runway he loosed a stentorian roar upon the crawling inspection gang that swarmed over the huge body. "All hands take stations!"

The boatswain trotted up half breathless from the acrobatics of his long climb to the ZR's summit where he

had been directing the outside party. "All clear, sir. Sound as a rock top-side and aft."

Scotty glanced ruefully at the ruined engine-egg which with the débris of its metal innards was scattered blackly across the clean ice.

"She'll crab it, sir," he groaned.

"Crab it nothing!" snapped the Skipper. "Ease up on your port engines and you'll equalize the strain. Don't you remember the time the old ZR-3 nearly decapitated the Woolworth Tower?"

He turned to Bliss. A sly grin wrinkled the corners of his eyes.

"By the way, Eppley, since Fate has sort of given you the bulge on the old man I'm going to get even by making you my assistant. You'll do the navigating from now on. And it'll be your job to look out for that land you say we ought to find up here."

"But it's not along this course, sir! We ought to make a detour further south in order to pick it up," protested Bliss.

Swinging up over the roof rail the Skipper paused. "You know I really wish we did have time to have a look down there," he said a little wistfully. "Think of finding new land! But we haven't the time. We—" Abruptly he broke off and gave vent to a whistle of surprise. "For Billy's sake look at that!"

Following the line of his pointing finger the two behind him glanced northward. At once they, too, gave vent to gasps of astonishment. Not five hundred yards away and directly between the dirigible and her goal had risen what seemed to be a wall of white vapor. This wall extended to right and left as far as the eye could see.

It was at least fifty feet high. It was advancing. And while it appeared solid without, as it came closer there were visible through its shadowy van a myriad writhing

A CLOSE SHAVE

figures that swayed and danced with violent swirling movements. The brilliant sun still shone. The air was still. No warning sound was audible. Yet there ahead with sinister noiseless tread came the terror of the polar pack: the sudden summer blizzard.

"Stand by to cast off!" thundered the Captain.

Scotty dashed madly to the after car. "Man all engines! Start 'em up!"

But even before the welcome tumult of the powerful propellers had swelled to cruising pitch a deeper roar drowned all puny man-made noise. With the shriek of a maddened Titan the tempest was upon them. The giant dirigible struggling upward through the flying drift quailed before the blow. Like a blinded thing she hung. With all engines going full speed ahead she slipped back inch by inch, helpless in a grip of crushing power.

CHAPTER X

HELPLESS!

IT WILL be grievous news for many people to learn that within fifteen minutes of the storm's first impact five seasoned sailors on the ZR-5 were down and out with seasickness. Air travel in moderate winds will always be comfortable as compared with an ocean voyage. The incessant ground-swell movement of the sea-borne vessel will be absent. But once let the dirigible come to grips with a real old-fashioned humdinger of a gale—and they're pretty regular affairs some months of the year—and new names will have to be invented for what we now shudderingly term "pitching and rolling."

"Where's that gosh-dinged mess attendant?" snapped the Skipper querulously between the spurts of fiery language that he poured through the communication lines to sweating green-faced men in every part of his ship.

It so happened that at that moment the "gosh-dinged" individual in question was still in the galley and had just completed pouring the ordered coffee into a large porcelain pot. Considerably less than half of the beverage reached its destination. The remainder slushed wetly back and forth across the deck which now was swaying incessantly with wild swoops and jerks. Staggering down the narrow passageway the boy finally reached the pilot house door on the forward side of the mess room. Just as he put his trembling hand on the knob some sixth sense prompted him to glance over his shoulder. What he saw caused him to emit a piercing scream. For in that instant the ZR-5 had made a frightful lunge downward at an

HELPLESS!

angle no ship of the sea ever dreamed of attaining. Unable to stand such strain the mess table had broken from its moorings and came careening towards the helpless boy. Twice his shrill cries cut through the thin panel between him and his commanding officer before the final crash came.

"What the hell—?" was framed on the Skipper's lips. The next second an avalanche of coffee, table legs, Filipino legs (and arms), splintered wood and metal fragments burst from the separating bulkhead and swept him helplessly to the deck.

At any other time such a cataclysm would have been a matter of considerable official red tape. Damage to government property to say nothing of assault and battery of one's commanding officer, even though accidental, are grave misdemeanors in a military service. But now the giant ZR-5 was fighting for her life. Buffeted by a gale of incredible strength, her human warders blinded by the swirling snow without, she dove and rolled and skyrocketed as if from reckless fear she had suddenly gone stark mad.

Communication with the engine-eggs suddenly ceased. As they were invisible through the drift it was impossible to tell if the propellers were turning over or not; indeed, if the structures themselves were still attached to the ship. Near at hand and from just outside the control car came a violent cracking noise that was audible even above the fearful turmoil of the storm.

Captain Devon with scarce a glance at the horrified mess attendant scrambled to his feet and sprang up the ladder. Raising the overhead hatch a crack he peered through. Spray of fine snow sifted down, half-blinding him.

"Wow!" he gasped, "She must have a rip in her for-

ward. I can't see anything. But that noise means a torn section in the sheath."

All turned serious faces upon him. Once the outer covering started going there could be no hope for the ZR-5. Searching fingers of the gale would quickly reach the fragile gas-containers and burst them like so many toy balloons.

"Let me go up," volunteered Bliss and Scotty almost in the same breath.

The Skipper shook his head. "It would be suicide, boys. No, we've got to make a lower level. If the ship goes we must at least save the men. Once those gas bags start and we'll be dropping in sixty seconds!"

Though dancing crazily the ZR-5 still answered her horizontal rudder and nosed slowly down through the maelstrom of flying snow and wind. Occasional rifts in the drift made visible the ice floes beneath. But their sharp and jagged pinnacles no longer stood out, for the smoothing brush of the tempest had painted out all lines as a mountain fog blurs peak and crag.

The dirigible lay nearly broadside to the wind now. What little control was left her meant only that for the time being she could be worked to a lower level if desired.

Suddenly through the dense scud to leeward loomed a towering barrier of ice. A startled cry escaped the helmsman clinging weakly to his control lever. Bliss emitted an "Oh!" of astonishment. Captain Devon gripping the port coaming did not see this new peril at first. But at Scotty's wild "God help us now!" he sprang across the little pilot house and peered out.

Now it is all very well to say a "pressure ridge" is simply an elevated wall of ice fragments caused by wind or tide driving floes together so that they collide and then disintegrate along their edges. And it is quite as colorless

HELPLESS!

to say these ridges are high as a house and higher. But no power of written word can ever wholly describe the frightful picture in its awful hair-raising reality. Imagine miles on miles of pack ice ten to fifty feet in thickness driven by a hurricane which buffets countless millions of tiny pinnacles each acting as a sail and totaling an immeasurable area. The whole incredible pressure then concentrated upon a single floe edge grinding against its neighbor. Noise like a thousand straining hawsers popping and crackling; like the booming of a torrent's ice jam freed in May; like the splitting of a mountainside by earthquake; like the crumpling shattering grind of a score of ocean liners ramming headlong; like the stamping, pounding riot of innumerable locoed cattle. . . . Pen can never limn the awfulness of the polar pack gone mad. No linear dimensions can measure the Titan features of the pressure ridges which from it erupt.

These ridges had, of course, been visible from the ZR-5 as she passed over them earlier in the day. But from the altitude at which she was flying their vertical lines were flattened, their length foreshortened. So that now, close by, to the stunned observers in the airship's pilot house it seemed that, as if to seal their final doom, the Demons of the Pack had flung a barrier of marble boulders in their path against which the helpless dirigible must dash herself to pieces in the twinkling of an eye.

But perturbation held no part in the doughty Skipper's repertoire. While his three companions were in the throes of their new and very justifiable agitation his nimble mind was meeting the emergency half-way and preparing once more to baffle Fate.

Without wasting time to commit himself to orders he sprang to the rungs leading to the control car's roof and the next instant disappeared into a whirling cloud of powdery snow.

"What can he do?" groaned Scotty.

But something told Bliss the Skipper's genius would toe the mark again.

By this time both he and McAlford were scrambling up the ladder after their commanding officer with a feeling of blind loyalty to their senior rather than because any clear line of action had presented itself. Then over his shoulder Bliss saw flash by the starboard window the light patent anchor which was stored atop the car. Shredding after it whirled its manila line which, he knew, led to a metal ringbolt set in the longitudinal girder overhead.

"The crazy fool!"

"What?" said Scotty, spitting snow and tobacco without regard for aim.

"He's thrown the emergency anchor over the side!" wailed Bliss. "It wouldn't hold a straw hat in this cyclone!"

Which was quite true. But then Captain Devon never for an instant thought it would. Actually what he had in his ingenious mind was not clear until some thirty seconds later when the anchor's steel fluke caught, swung the drifting dirigible's blunt nose sharply downward toward the ice, and held her taut for one dizzy lingering second against the howling blizzard. In the next gust the light line snapped. Whereat, with a bounce like a rubber ball, the huge ship sprang back and upwards from her momentary checkrein. With the natural buoyancy that was hers she leaped lightly as a hurdling cavalry charger over the barrier ridge of ice and slid gently into the narrow zone of quiet just beyond.

A shout of applause greeted the Skipper as he swung like a snow-stippled Santa Claus back into the pilot house.

Stamping his cold feet upon the deck he flashed a grin of appreciation. Then, "Out with you!" he cried. "Not a second to lose! We've got to moor her here in this

lee. It's our only chance! Eppley, you have a skin *parka* on. Beat it out there to the ridge and take our nose line! McAlford, roust out the gang aft! Give 'em hell!"

Captain Devon's demand for instant action was well based on the facts of the case. The ZR-5 had made a miraculous leap over the granite wall of icy débris. She had skinned down the opposite side by a matter of inches. She now hung momentarily in a sort of backwash of eddy currents caused by the defensive effect of the lofty wind-break that lay between her and the full force of the gale. But her slight positive buoyancy coupled with the fact that the serrated summit of the pressure ridge permitted an occasional gust to strike her upper body made it but a question of minutes before she would be once more at the mercy of the elements.

As Bliss dropped over the side and fell sprawling upon the crystal surface of the floe beneath he involuntarily glanced upward. To his horror he saw for the first time the great gaping hole in the body sheathing. The tear ran from the airship's nose clear to the turn of her forward shoulder. A broad flap hung down, offering an inviting target for the next blast that came along. Assuredly there was little now between the noble craft and utter annihilation at the hands of Nature's invisible artillery.

Stumbling and slipping, he ran at best speed possible towards the precipitous mass of tumbled ice fragments ahead. One look over his shoulder brought a shuddering realization of the proximity of doom. Not fifty yards to leeward from the foot of the ridge the quiet zone cut off. There in sharp demarcation the hell of drift and wind was renewed with fury unimpaired. Above him across the toothed pinnacles of the ridge the blizzard roared as through a tunnel.

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"There on the ice, stand by!"

Faintly came the cry, though the man he saw braced with a heaving line on the control car's nose was within an easy stone's throw.

He seized the monkey's paw and hove with all his strength. A sailor muffled in hooded wind-proof and staggering drunkenly like himself joined him and helped haul the heavier hawser out. Together they slipped its bowline over a sharp projection.

Aft struggled another group. Amidships four lines were got out. Driven by the Skipper's infectious energy all hands worked with a frenzy that soon resulted in the ZR-5 being moored securely in less time than it usually took to lead out a single cable. She lay parallel to the axis of the ridge, and except for a slight swaying motion rested quietly in her providential refuge.

As quickly as the men were freed they were sent to repair the ugly body damage higher up. A cordon of them clambered up inside the cavernous interior and by working along the dizzy heights of the polygonal frame ranged themselves around the gaping hole in the sheath. All were armed with hooked poles which enabled them to hoist and respread the heavy fabric.

Mariners of the last generation laid aloft and spread to the swinging yardarm. With numbing fingers and aching bellies they hugged the wooden spar and wrestled the flapping canvas into its waiting bunt. It was a short sharp fight. A good fight, though, for it had its limitations and the seafarers always won.

But those grim days are done. Our mammoth modern greyhound of the air is replacing the lumbering cruiser of the sea. She has no sail, nor bunt, nor swaying creaking yardarm. Yet the sailor has not changed.

Perilously high, clinging to metal edges bitterly cold, and crawling along by inches the heroic crew of the

ZR-5 drove unquestioning to their task. Perched at a mid-point nearly equally perilous was David Devon, the relentless.

"*Space yourselves!*" he bellowed, his voice echoing uncannily among the duralumin rafters. For a moment the roar of the gale outside rose above the power of his steely lungs. Then, "What do you think this is? A tea party?" he shrieked as four clinging pigmies hesitated at one narrow angle nearly a hundred feet above the level of the ZR's floor. A smoke of snow enveloped them as the wind drove cruelly through the rent.

With pathetic slowness the little band circled the hole. Those at the further end leaned first and hooked at the flapping sheathing hung below. Slowly they passed their burden on. Slowly the fabric spread. Twice it was carried away. Once a man numbed by cold slipped and would have fallen to his death had not his neighbor caught him as if by a miracle and held his limp body until another could arrive and help lower him to safety.

Slowly, heartbreakingly, the fight went on: ever the sailor's fight against wind and cold and the hard unfeeling elements of his vessel's structure. Not a swinging yard-arm, nor a flapping canvas to be wrestled merrily into its swelling bunt. But a bitterer, more torturing phase of that age-old war the men of the sea and the air shall forever wage to gain their ends.

And so the hole was closed. The baffled wind still howled its threats without. But within the looming tunnel of the ZR's monstrous body all was calm. Once again Jack Tar had won.

David Devon met his staggering company as they swung exhausted from the braces.

"Good boys!" he told them. And there was that in his tone which somehow repaid them for the agony they

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had suffered. "A mug up for all hands! Pronto!" he told the boatswain. "Make it snappy!"

At the forward hatch he met what looked like a pair of Eskimo hunters. They accosted him in voices hoarse from shouting at one another in the gale.

"We took a look around her, Captain," said McAlford; for the more ponderous Eskimo was he. "And I'm afraid—" His voice suddenly broke.

"Afraid of what?" snapped Devon.

Scotty gulped. Then in a tone of death, he said: "Captain, I'm afraid our goose is cooked. The whole vertical rudder is carried away from the bottom post up! We must have struck when we skipped the pressure ridge."

"Absolutely gone," added Bliss brokenly.

With a look of desperation on his drawn face Captain Devon lowered himself into the car below. "The men are all in," he muttered. "I wonder—" He shook his head wearily. This last blow was almost too crushing for human will to bear.

CHAPTER XI

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

“AND, Padilla.—”

“Yessir.”

“Tell the radio chief I want to see him.”

“Yessir—yessir.”

“And bring in some more coffee—a lot more.”

“Yessir.”

The Filipino boy with a patch over one eye from his recent bout with the mess-room table darted for the door.

“*Padilla!*” roared the Skipper. “Which are you going to do first?”

“The coffee, sir?” queried the brown boy anxiously.

“*No!*”

“Oh—the radio—?”

“*No!*”

Padilla stared at his commanding officer. They were all crazy, these white men—these Americans who were not content to live on the earth where they were born and do the things their fathers had done before them. Even their language was an insane jumble.

“Padilla,” the Skipper chuckled softly, “do ’em *both* first!”

“What a man!” thought Bliss, as the bewildered mess attendant disappeared. That Captain Devon had the temerity to joke at such a time as this was beyond his comprehension.

He glanced around the little wardroom. Its former luxury was now a thing of the past. Wreckage of the mess table lay lashed against the after bulkhead. But

three of the aluminum chairs remained out of the original dozen. The Skipper was perched on one; Scotty's vast bulk filled and overflowed the second. Bliss braced himself wearily on the third. For the ZR-5, despite the lee in which she was moored, still swung and danced with incessant jerky movements that made sleep or even rest wholly out of the question.

Even the standing lights burned with a sickly glare, the voltage having dropped when the last smash-up short-circuited the main generator.

A tall cadaverous youth with a roving jaundiced eye staggered in. "Wish to see me, sir?" he asked in a thin voice.

"Hello, Sparks!" the Skipper greeted him. "Home was never like this! Eh?"

The dirigible sidestepped and dropped three feet with the swiftness of gravity. The radio operator clutched wildly at the nearest stanchion. An undulation ran up his long body as if a dangling rope had been given a shake.

"No—sir," he stammered weakly. "That is, sir—"

"Buck up, Sparks!" laughed the Captain. "Now tell me, can you reach Point Barrow?"

The operator shook his head. "No, sir. Not juice enough to cover fifty miles even if we jammed her on full. And we must be a couple of hundred miles out, aren't we, sir?"

The Skipper nodded. "A good deal more than that. Even allowing for drift." He turned to Scotty. "McAlford, we've got to get that generator in as soon as possible. With our rudder gone we might have to abandon the flight altogether. Steering by the engines would do for a while. But I doubt whether we could make North Cape that way. If we go adrift from this ice bank we're lying behind now we should take up about the mouth of

the Mackenzie River. We ought to shoot a radio through now, if possible, so that a relief party can be sent out along the coast to save what's left of the ship."

Scotty moaned audibly. How the Skipper could sit and make plans for landing a wreck or breaking adrift was inconceivable. Yet common sense told him that the roaring blizzard outside which made the inside such a nightmare portended far worse possibilities than just dropping peacefully off the drifting dirigible somewhere along the northern coast of Canada.

"How about a little news?" queried the Skipper.

The wireless receiving set was brought and rigged. Fortunately the ZR's aërials strung across her upper runway were still intact. As they were well elevated and had a spread of nearly six-hundred feet their range was excellent.

Finding the radio operator too shaken to handle the mechanism McAlford fortified himself with a fresh cigar and began to tune in. Bliss stretched himself on the unsteady deck in hopes of getting a few winks of sleep. The Skipper alternated between trying nervously to light his pipe and securing intelligible messages from the half-frozen lookouts who appeared from time to time to report on the condition of the terribly strained moorings. Not only was there the constant risk that the lines would carry away with the terrific strain upon them; but there was the ever-present menace of the pressure ridge being ruptured suddenly by a shift in the floe pressure on either side of it. Once the helpless ZR-5 got adrift again her destruction would be almost inevitable. She had no reserve mooring hawsers. Even if the engines could be run full power now that her rudder was out of commission, there was no means for steering her to safety clear of the ice. And once she began to break up there could be no course but to abandon her. In the event of such a

calamity the poorly protected men must perish by cold and hunger before they could possibly make the march of several hundred miles to land.

It must not be understood that the ZR's equipment had been neglected. Every device for the safety and comfort of its crew that human ingenuity could invent had been provided before she even left Washington. Arctic clothing, concentrated rations, even several small sledges and sledge rifles, had all been included in her stores.

The airship's present terrible plight was only a sample of the circumstances in which the pioneer in any geographical field sooner or later finds himself. Weather of unexpected brutality. Base of supplies miles away. Physical and nervous strain reducing the endurance of his men. Doubt, anxiety, suspense, all combining to undermine the judgment and the will. Admirable it was indeed that Captain Devon still had heart to sit in the shadowy horror of that swaying fragile box and listen to the voices of the night.

"Crack-k-k-l-e! Buz-z-z-z!"

"Attaboy!" murmured Scotty twirling the polished knobs.

Came a faint weird voice as from an infinite distance: ". . . with us to-night—crackle—a violin solo—buz-z-z—from the Philadelphia Symphony and known—*snapp!*"

"Must be Newark," suggested Bliss. "Gee, Scotty, that's six thousand miles away!"

". . . which follows in half an hour. And—buzz-z-z—"

Silence. Then suddenly with a clearness that made Bliss sit up with a jerk and even the taciturn Devon tighten his teeth on his pipestem, broke the distant announcer's voice through the myriad sounds of storm and creaking car:

"A moment, please—a moment, please. I have to an-

VOICES IN THE NIGHT

nounce a wonderful bit of news. WXC has just received by relay from its San Francisco representative a message picked up from the temporary broadcast station at Point Barrow."

"Now we're in for it!" burst the Skipper. Bliss glanced up inquiringly. The announcer confirmed the Captain's fears.

"The greatest race in the history of the world has just begun. At nine-fifteen this morning mountain time a French plane hopped off for its bold attempt to fly across the North Pole. Engine trouble forced it down two miles from land. Norway's entry not ready to start. ZR-5 got away in fine style at ten-eighteen mountain time. Her speed was estimated at about one hundred miles per hour. At eleven o'clock she passed out of sight still going strong. Just ahead of her was the Belgian plane. Immediately behind her was the British plane. . . . Crackle! Buz-z-z! By this time the ZR-5 has reached the Top of the Globe. She must be hovering in the rays of the midnight sun over the Apex of our Sphere."

"Attaboy!" chuckled Scotty.

". . . the weather according to reports being ideal."

"Bull's-eye!" chortled Scotty. "Ideal for flying kites, eh, Bliss?"

". . . on the Polar Ocean, which is 2,000 miles in diameter and has a total area of 3,600,000 square miles, larger than the whole United States! This vast sea is covered the year around with a field of heavy ice drifting to and fro under impulse of the tides and winds. In the peaceful arctic summer—"

"Ha! Ha!" bubbled Scotty. "Did you get that?"

Captain Devon held up his hand. "Pipe down, McAlford. Maybe he'll tell you something you don't know."

". . . teeming with birds that breed along the northern

shores of North America. Seals basking on the ice. Roaming herds of caribou and musk oxen along the arctic prairies that skirt the Polar Basin."

Entered the boatswain. "Those after lines are chafing, Captain. I have done the best I can with some of that old canvas which we've been using as tarpaulins over the upper tanks. But I'm afraid they won't last the night out."

". . . conceivable that some day," continued the voice, "that some day the Far North will be inhabited by a great fraction of the world's white population."

"There you are, boatswain!" smiled the Skipper. "Why not stake out a little claim right here and now. Real-estate values bound to go up."

"Heaven forbid!" breathed the boatswain fervently and swung to a bulkhead fixture to keep himself from being thrown bodily upon his commander by the ZR's awful lurching.

". . . Take the Roman Empire which flourished in the subtropical confines of the Mediterranean. When Julius Cæsar visited England and brought back reports of people living there his fellow countrymen were incredulous. 'Live in that cold northern country? Impossible!' they cried. So may it be with the Polar Regions in years to come. Cold, no doubt; and rigorous beyond the strength of the average man to stand. But with its summer sunshine day and night, its lovely . . . crack-k-k-le . . . buz-z-z-z—"

The voice broke abruptly off. Thudding roar of the gale outside sifted in and pervaded the rocking car. Scotty twirled his knobs vehemently, venting his annoyance with savage bites upon his unlit stogie.

"It's gone!" he cried. "Whole aërial's blown away!"

The boatswain, dangling from his fingerhold across the room shrugged his muffled shoulders. "Don't see how it

lasted this long, Mr. McAlford," he growled. "Blowin' hell and blue blazes out there. Hundred-and-ten-mile gale if it's an inch! And them hawsers—".

As if in answer to his word the ZR lifted suddenly and with a violent lurch took on a new position nose downward at a sharp angle and swaying sidewise in a fashion that warned those aboard her that the moorings had begun at last to surrender to the storm.

As before, the Captain led the fight to save his ship. Weary men sleeping fully dressed were hauled from snow-choked hatches and driven to the bitter task of renewing the ruptured lines.

The nose hawsers still held. Also one amidships. But the latter had sprung in such a fashion that the ZR's stern, which was no longer held at all, lifted high in the air and caught the full force of the gale as it swept across the summit of the pressure ridge. In consequence she danced and leaped about like a hobbled calf.

Three men were sent crawling up the sloping inner runway dragging with them a manila coil in hope that the stern might be again secured. But their heroic effort proved in vain. When they reappeared through the after hatch and attempted to crawl down to the car beneath, the bucking ZR's movements were so violent and the wind so strong that it was all they could do to hang on at all, much less try to work.

By nearly superhuman labor the midships mooring was doubled and sufficient strain put on it to reduce the huge body's dizzy swoops from side to side. Also the nose lines were tautened in such a way that the control car ceased to swing so perilously towards the near-by wall of ice.

Officers and men worked shoulder to shoulder. Indeed, in the driving snow and dim light there was no means of distinguishing which was which among the struggling

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hooded gnomelike figures that staggered about from one rope to another. Only the dancing pigmy in their midst, Captain David Devon the indomitable, stood out as a distinct identity in the losing battle against the blizzard.

It began to look as if once more the crisis had been passed. To be sure, the dirigible was half standing on her nose with her after body fully exposed to the tempest. But so stoutly was she now secured that so long as the wall of ice held firm she would at least ride out the gale and have a fighting chance to reach land reasonably undamaged, or even of continuing on her course.

Then without warning either by sound or by movement the floe on which the crew had been working suddenly split. In both directions ran a jagged black line of widening water which cut the pressure ridge at a point almost exactly opposite the ZR's nose.

"*Get aboard!*" screamed the Skipper. Like so many scurrying rats the men scrambled up.

At almost the first crash the two bow lines, which happened to be secured on opposite sides of the rupture, were carried away. This released the dirigible's nose which rose at once. Unhappily the midships hawser held. As a result the 600-foot body seesawed downward crushing the starboard after engine-egg against the nearest pinnacle of ice. Two mechanics rolled out unhurt and dashed madly for the radio car near by. The next swoop upward swung them dizzily aloft clinging by teeth and toes wherever they could get a hold.

From somewhere the boatswain appeared with a small hand-ax. He glanced wildly about for the Skipper. His face working, he waved the tool aloft. Captain Devon raised one hand in assent. The boatswain stooped and with a single hack severed the last remaining strand that held the ZR-5 to the demolished ridge. Freed at last she shot up. Her positive buoyancy was now far above nor-

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mal for she had lost two engine-eggs, nearly a ton of hawsers abandoned on the ice, and considerable framing from both the larger cars.

“If this isn’t the end,” said Bliss grimly to himself from a corner of the snow-swept pilot-house roof where he clung, “I’m a liar!”

CHAPTER XII

LAND!

IN FIVE minutes the altitude dials in the ZR's chart-house read 3,500 feet. And she was still rising.

Also she had ceased her crazy antics. With a slight list to port due to the loss of her starboard engine-eggs she floated quietly. Behind the protection of the control car's walls and windows one could not have told she was moving at all.

Below her the ice pack was invisible. Only a gray smother of snow vapor marked the raging blizzard on its surface. Overhead the sky was cloudless, steely blue, and cold. Northeast, on its upward slope, rolled the early morning sun.

Captain Devon stood at his old spot near the wheel. He had not slept for thirty-six hours. His face, as were those of all aboard, was deeply lined. His eyes were blurred and shot with tiny lines of red. He munched a thick sandwich of bully beef.

"Start the aquæator," he commanded. "No telling when that wind will drop. But I don't want to be scraping around up at this ceiling."

"Aye, aye, sir," said McAlford, and repeated the orders by messenger to his assistant further aft.

It may be explained to the uninitiated that change of level is gained by a dirigible in motion just as by a plane. Her horizontal rudder is tilted and she dips or rises accordingly. But when the airship has no steerageway her rudder becomes a useless appendage. Resort is then had to another expedient: Water ballast is condensed from

the atmosphere by sucking air rapidly through a small bin of chloride salts. On the ZR-5 this device was called the "aquæator." It enabled her to take on nearly a ton of water in an hour. Within twenty minutes of the Skipper's command she was dropping slowly towards the pack.

Bliss hung over a chart of the Polar Sea spread upon the little plotting table. A sort of ecstasy lit up his face.

"Wind nor'nor'west, Eppley," the Skipper prompted him. "How does that put us? About the mouth of the Mackenzie River, doesn't it?"

Taking the dividers from their rack Bliss stepped off the ZR's first course and speed towards the Pole. "Hopped off around ten," he murmured. "Ninety over the ground. Six hours, say 500 miles. Guess we must have made latitude 81° north, sir."

"Don't forget the wind was dead to the south at first. She's backed only in the past hour."

"Yes, sir. And now we're working south southeast."

"Mackenzie, Eppley?"

"No, sir!" cried Bliss. "That is, I don't think we ought to care just now!"

Captain Devon stepped to his elbow. "What do you mean?"

With hands that trembled Bliss pointed to the ragged dotted line he had plotted on the chart's white surface to indicate the dead reckoning route the ZR-5 had so far taken. "Right across the unexplored area!" he exclaimed. "If there's land we'll find it! The very course I wanted the Navy Department to have her take!"

The Skipper chuckled. "Better look out, Eppley. They'll say you got us into this mixup just to carry out your ideas."

Bliss sprang to the window and studied the gray horizon southward. But his scrutiny went unrewarded.

"Why not go on top?" suggested the Skipper.

Quickly the word went about that land might be discovered. Scarcely had Bliss crawled panting out on the lofty runway at the very summit of the dirigible than the entire crew began to straggle up.

"Take a good look, lads," enjoined the Captain. "You are nearly over the center of the million square miles of unexplored polar pack."

All craned their necks in appreciation of the spectacle. Yet, as scenery, the view was certainly disappointing. A vast circular waste of drift-grayed ice below; the red sun just north; the cold clean sky overhead. And the bitter penetrating wind to dull all sense of beauty a man might have.

"Still dropping, McAlford?"

"Yes, sir; under two thousand now."

Captain Devon scanned the northern sector with his glasses.

"Very well, stop her. I believe the wind is easing off. See that clear streak there?"

Turning again to the men, some of whom were already showing signs of indifference to the thrill of being among the first to gaze upon an hitherto unseen portion of the globe, he went on:

"We're not the only aviators to drift across a portion of the Polar Sea. On the 11th of July, 1897, the Swede, Andrée, put off from Spitsbergen in a balloon. His idea was that air currents would carry him across the Pole. He used ropes dragging on the ice to guide him. Five hours after he started he threw out a buoy containing a message stating that he had passed the eighty-second parallel, and that all was well. That was the last the world ever heard from him. It is supposed he was struck by one of the summer blizzards which we have just so providentially escaped and his balloon destroyed, leaving him and his two companions to perish on the ice."

A shout from the outskirts of the listeners made all turn quickly and strain their wind-burned eyes along the dim horizon.

"Over there, sir!" cried the boatswain, pointing a little south of east.

Binoculars were leveled in the direction indicated. The Skipper shook his head. "Sorry, boatswain. Only a bit more wind."

Bliss's heart, which had missed several beats at the cry, sank into his boots. As the Captain said, the boatswain's sharp eye had noted only a darker and higher irregularity in the heavy fog bank that still hung over the level of the ice.

"There ought to be land here," continued the Captain encouragingly, "because of the way the polar currents run. Am I right, Mr. Eppley?"

Ignoring the bantering note in his questioner's tone Bliss explained his theory. Not that he had any desire to convince the crew of the ZR-5 of its correctness. But he realized with terrible intensity how critical was the present situation.

The dirigible was now temporarily safe, even though helpless. She would probably drift towards the northern coast of Canada and there be moored and repaired for another flight, unless the season grew too late. It was still conceivable that there might be a drop in the wind below, which would enable Captain Devon to bring her to the ice and attempt to get her going at once. She still stood to win the race across the Pole if only she could fly. But she could not fly until a jury rudder could be rigged. And this job was wholly out of the question until she could be brought to a position resting on the surface.

By the purest whim of fortune she was now drifting over almost the exact area in which all available data

indicated there was land. Yet this area was so tremendous that even if there did exist a Polar Continent of substantial size—the size of New England, say—it would be but another streak of luck to sight it from the ZR-5.

Thus rose Bliss' determination to stimulate the jaded interests of the men to search with all the eyesight the gale had left them for something that might look like land.

The boatswain came over and asked permission to have a look through his glasses. "I may be mistaken, sir," he explained. "But that sure looks funny over there." He waved his hand at the darkish smear he had reported the moment before.

Before Bliss had time further to study the spot he found himself called upon to answer an inquiry about the *Jeannette*. He replied:

"She was commanded by Lieutenant De Long, an officer of the United States Navy. He took her out of San Francisco in 1879 and up through Bering Strait into the Polar Sea. He jammed her in the ice northwest of Alaska, hoping to drift across the Pole. She was crushed by pressure of the floes and De Long with many of his companions perished. The interesting part about the *Jeannette* was, that her wreckage drifted across the Polar Sea just as De Long had predicted and came down past the east coast of Greenland. Nansen twenty years later repeated her drift in his *Fram*. Such facts as these constitute a very substantial part of the proof that we should find land right here where we are to-night. Only a large island somewhere hereabouts could well account for the peculiarity of the polar currents that swept—"

A loud shout broke from the boatswain:

"It isn't land! *But it's smoke!*"

A thrill of excitement swept the shivering men. Every eye swung eastward. The mist of drifting snow had

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thinned. Through it was visible the faint but unmistakable line of the horizon. Almost dead east from the ZR-5 there rose from this line an inverted "V" of heavy black vapor. A moment later through his binoculars Bliss saw with beating heart a low and pinkish nubble barely jutting over the edge of his vision's limit.

"It is land!" he cried exultingly.

A spontaneous cheer broke from the throats of the men about as Captain David Devon gripped the hand of his stowaway and exclaimed:

"By God, you deserve it, Eppley, if ever a man deserved anything in this danged life!"

CHAPTER XIII

A DESPERATE PLAN

IT WAS characteristic of the arctic that by the time the ZR-5 once more reached the level of the pack the blizzard had subsided.

Scotty rubbed his eyes. "Say, Bliss," he said as the white floes sparkling in the incandescent sunshine came gently up to meet the battered airship, "is this a dream? Or am I just waking from the doggonedest nightmare I've ever had?"

The other looked up from the pad on which he was scribbling a list of traveling gear.

"I'd think an inventory of your department would tell you whether it was a nightmare or not. Two engines wrecked, leaks in fuel tanks five and six, generator burnt out, aërials—"

McAlford clapped his hands to his ears. "Have a heart!" he cried. "Spare me the horrid details and I'll admit the rest!"

But Captain Devon was even more agonizingly specific. For when the ZR-5 had lowered with an imperceptible touch upon the marble table of an old unbroken pan nearly a quarter of a mile in diameter he called a council of war.

"I believe that we can get enough out of our four engines to take us to land," he began. He made a rough mental calculation. "It's at least a hundred miles to that volcano we sighted. If this still weather and perfect visibility keep up we ought to be able to do around fifty. It's close to six o'clock now. If any of those lame ducks

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at Point Barrow are back in commission this morning they can't possibly be out here much before noon. It's off their course besides. Thus we can allow ourselves two hours for repairs and three hours to make the flight, and still stand a hundred to one chance that we shall be the first to set foot upon the new continent."

"Except the Norsemen," retorted Bliss under his breath. "If I've been right this far, may I not be right about them?" A little cold ripple ran up his spine at the thought.

At this moment the boatswain came up. Albeit he was a powerfully built man and temperamentally optimistic, this morning he seemed weakened both in body and in spirit.

"I don't want to be a quitter, Captain," he began with more than a suspicion of protest in his heavy voice.

The Skipper said nothing. It was his way rather to let men give vent to their feelings than have them accumulate an emotional pressure which must ultimately explode and do far more damage than dispute at an open forum.

The dirigible had no more mooring hawsers, the boatswain pointed out in vivid language. The strands of spare aerial, car lashings, balloon lacings, and other trash that he had been able to collect on the spur of the moment might do well to hold her with the air as beautifully still as now. "But—" he glanced shudderingly over his shoulder—"if another of them eruptions hits us, sir, as hit us just last night, we're gone babies, sir! I'm tellin' you!"

The Skipper smiled at the big man's comic despair. It was a reassuring smile, one calculated to dispel the boatswain's unhappy prognostications. Yet it failed.

It failed for the reason that the boatswain's fears were laid on solid facts. The facts were these: Despite the

still calm air, the sparkling sunshine, the glorious depth of cloudless azure sky, the vastly leveler ice pack of the open sea, despite all these conditions which were absolutely ideal for any sort of polar travel, the case of the ZR-5 was little short of desperate. Two engines lost, the remaining four all crippled. Control car battered almost beyond recognition. One hundred and fifty feet of forward sheathing torn and shredded. Fuel dangerously low. Radio wrecked. All electric circuits and generators paralyzed. Rudders, both vertical and horizontal, hanging in strings and tatters. The once-great airship, swift and powerful as a fabled monster of the skies, now weak and flabby like an enormous silver-bellied narwhal that had been slain and drawn upon the ice for butchering.

McAlford, dissatisfied with the reports he had received on the condition of the rudder struts, clambered up for personal inspection. He rejoined the council with a look that told more plainly than words the hopelessness of the case.

"Both spindles absolutely ruined!" he groaned. "It will take forty-eight hours at least to rig a jury rudder!"

"How about steering with the engines?"

He shook his head and his mouth drew grimly taut.

"Captain, I'm just as set as Eppley here on getting to that land. I know it's the chance of a lifetime."

"Of ten lifetimes!" burst Bliss.

Scotty shot him a look of compassion. He alone knew what the discovery meant to his friend.

"But human endeavor can only go so far, sir. I'm afraid now that if we try to run the engines out of balance, that is with higher speed to port or starboard in order to shift our course, we'll rip the eggs right off her. 'Twould mean the death of every man on watch. And, as the boatswain says, if we get into another bit of wind we won't just lose the ZR-5, but the crew aboard

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her will perish. Not that I'm afraid to die," he added quickly.

With impassive face and silence Captain Devon met the outburst. If he believed what his engineer had told him he made no sign. If he were inwardly perturbed his fear was wholly hidden. If he had concluded, on the other hand, to throw all caution to the winds and stake everything on one last desperate effort to drive the ZR on, there was no outward hint either by word or by fragmentary gesture that this was so.

Presently he glanced aft where two men were half-heartedly clearing the wreckage of the rudder. He swung his gaze to the egg of engine two, where the senior machinist was cursing gas propulsion with all the profanity and technical language at his command. Then with the suddenness and violence of a powder explosion he turned upon the little group before him.

"You dare stand around here and talk!" he thundered, "while the whole world thinks you've won!" In a sweep his arm flung southward. "A hundred million people helped build this ship of ours! A hundred million men and women backed us with their pennies and their prayers! We're heroes in their eyes. And we're driving mile on mile, so they were told by radio last night, down the other side of the Polar Sea. Do you hear me? The *other* side of the Polar Sea!" The arm dropped weakly to his side. "And what is the truth? A wreck. . . . A cripple. . . . A hopeless bag of wind! And manned—his voice lowered to a whisper—"manned by a gang of quitters!"

"Not our fault, sir," ventured the boatswain.

With a snarl like a wildcat's the little Skipper sprang towards him: "*Fault!*" he spat at the purpling Swede. "Who cares for 'faults'? Can excuses ever take the place of results?"

How strange is the genius of leadership! To cajole one minute, cruelly to drive the next. To damn and then to praise. To coax and then chastise. To propitiate, then spurn. To infuriate, then forgive. Dark before the dawn, sunshine after rain. Endless stimulating variety that leaves the subordinate thrilled or angry, vindictive or determined, but never for one single moment aware of the monotony of his task.

So went it with the minutes after Captain Devon's scarcely warranted attack upon his mate. Unable to turn his superior the boatswain half trotted down the ice floe, fire belching from his nostrils, so to speak. The first man he encountered sought to chaff him for the Skipper's "bawling out." A happy accident, that. For before the eyes of half the crew he bowled the teaser over with a blow between the eyes.

"Turn to, you bunch of loafers!" It was the bellow of an angry bull. And his shipmates knowing him of old, turned to with avid vigor that took no count of danger, time, nor toil.

The Skipper turned to Bliss. Fire had gone out of his eyes. But there was a quaver of passion in his voice as he spoke.

"Two things, Eppley, I've chalked against me in my conscience as I stand," solemnly he said. "One is the fact I know at last the single-handed battle you've been fighting. The other, that earlier to-day I almost weakened and considered drifting back to safety before we took her north again."

Strong words indeed. Yet sometimes, as Scotty said, human endeavor can only go so far.

Two hours slipped by. Hours of frantic labor. Fresh propellers were shipped to take the place of the ones ruined in the last night's storm. From the girders that had been underpinning of the engine wreckage was fash-

ioned framework for a rudder. The frazzled lacing that had held the dangerous rent in the main bag's forward sheathing through the blizzard was ripped out and relaced in double rows.

No time was taken to eat. Coffee and hot pannikins of food were doled out at intervals. The boatswain's wrath became transmuted by his memory of Eppley's words to a fever of exploratory passion. Standing over a sweating group of workers, or wrestling with them at some stubborn bolt or wire, he sketched in lurid terms the amazing promise just ahead. He drew from some exotic memory a land of fiery heights, of mellow verdured valleys, and peopled by a race more fearful than the cannibals of the Fijis, more fascinating than the fabled races of the stars. Hearing which, with the thrill of little children, the sailors slaved. Progress was made. Substantial progress. Yet by no means progress enough. For close to nine o'clock Bliss sought the Skipper in a mood of desperation.

"It's Welchor, sir!" he cried. "He's due to get away this morning. He knows that the others are all out of the race. He has every reason to believe that we, too, are quite done for. So he need not try to fly direct across the Pole. He will take a zigzag route. He will see the land that we have seen. He will reach it first. He will steal right out of our very hands the prize he doesn't deserve!"

"Steady, Eppley," soothed the Skipper. "What you say has something in it, provided your conjecture about Thorne Welchor's villainy is correct. But what else can we do? Surely no men on earth could beat this gang's speed right now."

Bliss glanced anxiously into the southwestern sky. He felt as if he should faint should there be seen the speck that would mean a plane.

"I have a plan, sir. A far less crazy plan that you would think of me." He smiled deprecatingly. "You have materials for a small sledge in your stores. Let me break them out. Give me five days' provisions. Compressed food. A rifle and a few rounds of ammunition for emergency. And I'll reach that land in forty-eight hours!"

A little sadly Devon shook his head.

"I admire your willingness to try the thing. But it savors of the impossible."

"Not at all, sir!" came the eager response. "Remember, I came overland from Nome. I am in excellent shape. From the Eskimos I learned a bit about travel on the ice. There is no night. With a light sledge I could make tremendous marches. We did over fifty miles the day before we reached Point Barrow."

"But if Welchor does come, as you suggest, he will be out here to-day. What is the sense of your taking such tremendous risks when there is so remote a chance of profit?"

"But, it isn't so remote as you think, sir. Even if he starts to-day he may see us and drop down for a talk. It is his game still to keep friendly with you in order to divert suspicion. He might have to come down for water as the Belgian did. He might even decide not to alight when he first reaches the land. In any event we have seen it before he has. And if now I might put foot upon it and plant the flag it is bound to belong to the United States. Otherwise—"

"By crickets, Eppley, I believe you have the right hunch after all!" Turning, he called McAlford from his engines.

Two men were despatched at once to break out sledge and traveling material that had been made a part of the dirigible's emergency equipment. A light pup tent, sleep-

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ing bag, camp ax, knife, line, and a five-pound, high-powered Winchester repeater with two hundred cartridges were found. A light patent arrangement of Primus stove and pot completed the living essentials. When the whole was assembled together on the ice it weighed less than fifty pounds. Yet, as Bliss' long hunting experience told him, here was sufficient to keep a man comfortable for an indefinite period provided game were found. To avoid wasting time hunting at the outset two tins of oil and a bag of concentrated food were added.

That Eppley was the man best fitted, as well as most deserving to make the dash, Captain Devon conceded at once. When it came to a companion he hesitated. Yet a second man he insisted upon. The danger of ice sledging alone warranted sparing another for the trip. Also with two engines off the dirigible there were really four extra men available for work aboard her.

"Would you be willing to try it?" he asked McAlford. "You two seem to be a pretty intimate pair of pirates."

"Would I!" exclaimed Scotty with the suddenness of a blasting charge. "*Gosh!*" Turning ruefully to his fagged toilers over the machinery, he added. "But can I desert my job here, sir?"

The Skipper grinned his appreciation. "Won't be desertion, McAlford. This is all just hack work now. Once we know you two are on your way we can take more time. We might be there as soon as you at that."

Abruptly the parley ended, for time was short. How short it was made Bliss squirm to think.

Twenty minutes to pack. An extra wasted minute to select the proper chart and a pocket sextant, lest their pathway deviate. A handshake with the Skipper. A wave at the cheering men. And the little party set forth.

Sewed inside of Bliss's shirt was a small silk flag. He would plant it on the new land. He would see its bright

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stars match the brilliance of the discovery, its stripes wave wands of ownership in the name of the country he loved. Then he would rescue the bit of colored silk to take it back and lay at the feet of his Joan. "Yours dear," he'd say. . . . He could almost see her sweet eyes shine, the glow come into—

"Say, old man," broke a worried voice at his elbow. "D'you suppose we'll be away longer than a hundred cigars? That's all I dared bring with the Old Man looking on,"

CHAPTER XIV

ACROSS THE FLOES

THE effrontery of it!

How the Demons of the North must have writhed in mortification! For in the full 400 years of war that iron men, from Hakluyt to Peary, had waged to wrest the secrets of the North from out its cold and darkness, there had been a substance of equality in the contest. Explorers of superhuman endurance had been pitted against incalculable cold and dark and bitter suffering. Year upon year they had struggled and fought and died. Rotting with scurvy, staggering with hunger, speechless from frost that penetrated the very marrow of their bones did Peary, Greely, Kane, and all the others of their fearless breed creep into the heart of the North to feed their tortured souls upon its sullenly surrendered secrets.

And now on this sparkling morning in June for a pair of light-clad absurdly sanguine mariners to tread the sacred floes!

Mayhap the very boldness of their effort saved them. For as if in stunned indifference the wind and weather held their peace while the two adventurers trudged across the icy plain.

The going was excellent, which was to be expected, from what little we know of the vast wilderness of the Polar Sea. For their route lay in an easterly direction some 500 miles north of the Alaskan coast and more than 300 northwest of the uninhabited shores of Prince Patrick Island. At this distance from any continental

barrier the main pack was less broken. Long gently rolling stretches of ice and wind-packed snow lay spread on every hand. Only the scattered bergs and nubbles of old ridges broke the monotony of the great white desert over which they traveled.

McAlford, stockily built and sheathed to some extent in human blubber, albeit healthy tissue, suffered in comparison with the wiry Indian at his side. But over the occasional pressure ranges that must be hurdled his powerful back was mostly called upon to juggle the precious sledge. So, though the temperature still hung under freezing despite the blazing sun, he panted and dripped with sweat while his leaner team mate traveled dry.

When the sun drove over the meridian Eppley called a halt.

"Not too hard, old scout," he cautioned. "This is a marathon all right, a double-barreled one as far as distance is concerned. But what counts now, you understand, is time."

The big man wiped his streaming face. "I'm soaked," he said. "I'm blistered in the feet and on the nose. I feel like a broiled live lobster and a dirty deck-swab bound in one. But dammit man, don't stop on my account!"

Bliss laughed. While he could not put it into words, there was something at once comic and heroic in McAlford that defied the shadows of discouragement.

In five minutes the little Primus hummed. Half a gallon of steaming tea was brewed. A cracked brace in the sledge bed was lashed. . . . Then the grind began again.

A mile beyond the halting place they came upon an ice peak higher than any yet they'd seen. From its summit a road was chosen forward. Thus might time be saved. For while the general spread was flat, the presence of

land to eastward was already making itself felt in a low but unmistakable series of parallel undulations bespeaking pressure from that direction.

No longer was the ZR's silvery dome in sight. Not a bird, nor rock, nor any single spot to break the awful desolation spread about. Ice, ice, ice, wide as the sky almost. . . . Unknown. Desolate. Dead. Silent.

"Gosh!" muttered McAlford, "but this is sure one hell of a part of the world! It's beautiful and it's ugly; both at the same time."

"Wouldn't you say cruel rather than ugly?" Bliss suggested.

The former gave a little shudder. "Maybe so. But anyway, it gives me creeps. Makes me feel as if it wouldn't care whether I dropped out here or not. As if it might even *like* to see me staggering around in drifts and dying on my feet!"

Came to them both a vision of the future. Hurtling monsters of the air driving back and forth across the top of the world as now our ocean liners plow the seven seas. The sudden storm, buffeting the hugest craft upon the ice. . . . The wreck. . . . The aftermath of human sheep huddled before the snow-knives of the blizzard. . . .

"But there will be ways invented," Bliss resumed, "just as ways have been invented against the perils of the sea."

"Only before they are invented," persisted the gloomy Scot, "think of the horrors that will come. Ugh!"

On and on the plodding sledgers. Round rolled the sun; unblinking; unshadowed by a vapor; unmarred by fleck of cloud. Surely Fate spun luck at last.

The sun bore north and very red when the two men paused and faced each other questioningly.

"I'm done," gasped McAlford, and flung himself upon the snow.

"No more than I," Bliss told him promptly. Which was kindness more than truth. For the inner fire of hope that drove him on was yet unquenched. Physical fatigue did not exist. Outcry of muscles for surcease from their torment scarcely touched his consciousness. "He hasn't come!" he fiercely told himself. "Scotty," he cried aloud, "those devils haven't come! We've made fifty miles if we've made an inch to-day! Look at that smoke cloud now! It's been piling up since ten! A few miles more and we'll see the land itself! If Welchor didn't start to-day we have a chance! Man, *we have a chance!*"

Bowed down by physical distress McAlford responded to his raving mate with what small strength was left him.

"Go it, man," he muttered heavily. "You're a horse! Start your sleep now. I'll fix the chow. Get away early without me. I'll bring the sledge. I'll catch you before you starve. Traveling light you may make land tomorrow."

Drone of Scotty's voice ceased. But a low and tuneless echo of it continued. At first each thought the other might be humming. Yet each man looking up knew promptly he had erred. With an exclamation of dismay Bliss searched the sky. But no airplane motor ever whined so plaintively as this.

Apprehensively McAlford glanced around. Only ice, endless unbroken leprous ice, rewarded his anxious gaze.

Then abruptly, Eppley laughed. So hoarse he was he cackled.

"Pressure, Scotty. That's all it is!"

"Wind again? Heaven help us!"

"Probably not. Shift of tide most likely. The whole pack being dragged against the land we're after, and jammed tightly into shore."

The low and ghastly moan increased. From a nubbled

ridge near by broke suddenly a series of staccato pops. A rectangular cake the size of a five-ton truck lifted bodily, heeled and tumbled crashing backwards through the thin-iced table of a small fresh pool on the surface of the adjacent floe. A pistol shot now rent the air. Both men jumped nervously.

"Watch yourself!" cried Bliss, and pointed towards the sledge. A writhing split in the solid ice on which it rested came crackling towards them opening as it ran, and passed directly under the stove and tent which had been unlashd.

In trepidation a new camp site was chosen on what appeared to be a firmer floe. But the grinding, tearing tumult went on unabated, an unearthly orchestra terrifying to the ear.

Bliss rigged the tiny tent in the lee of a wall of ice. He hacked out blocks to weight it down while Scotty boiled water for their stew of suet beef and bread.

Over the cheerless blue flame of the Primus the morrow was discussed. Scotty's daring scheme to separate was negatived by both after brief consideration. The risk was scarcely justified as yet. Possibly Welchor had had some engine trouble of his own. Surely he would drop and have a chat with Devon on his way out if he sighted the crippled dirigible. In either case would ensue sufficient delay to permit them to reach the volcano still smoking away on the eastern horizon.

Sleep came swiftly to the tired pair. And, except for an occasional uneasy half return to consciousness when the grinding pack ice grew obstreperous, neither stirred.

McAlford, awakened by pain of overstrained muscles, was out first. Bliss heard him fumbling with the Primus, softly cursing to himself in the frosty morning air. His footsteps crunched across the snowy surface. Followed then the sound of fresh ice chopped for morning tea.

Suddenly the chopping stopped. A moment of silence. Then broke upon the chill air a loud cry. An instant later thudding steps towards the tent.

"Hey! Wake up! For Pete's sake come and look!" The excitement in his companion's voice compelled Bliss to scramble half naked from his bag and dash anxiously outside.

It was a footprint. Like Robinson Crusoe discovering the track in the sand, so had McAlford gazed with trepidation upon two indentations upon a small patch of soft snow beyond the camp. They were large for a man.

"Must have been wearing a boot," muttered Bliss.

Then to both came the same thought. Was it possible that Welchor had flown out while they were asleep, keeping his plane at such an altitude as to prevent their hearing the noise of his engine? It was a likely thing to have happened, Eppley pointed out, for the man was anxious only to make sure that he would be first upon the new land. . . . How he must have chuckled to himself, peering at the camp and its unsuspecting sleepers!

"Do you suppose he really slid down and had a look?" murmured McAlford in crestfallen tones. "One on us all right! And it means that he is there by this time. I suppose we may as well go back, don't you?"

No reply. He glanced up. Bliss was staring westward, his eyes shaded. Suddenly the latter turned and ran for the sledge. He pulled his glasses from their case and leveled them upon the horizon in the direction from which they had come. After a moment he said quietly:

"It might just as well have been that, Scotty. But it isn't. Here he is now, unless my eyes deceive me."

Low in the west, as he said, McAlford saw a speck in the sky.

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST DASH

A CURIOUS hesitancy began to mark the plane's advance. In a long easy turn it swung due south. For a few minutes it steadily climbed. Then it dipped, nosed downward half a thousand feet, and turned again. Again it climbed. It swerved to north. Another dip. . . .

Suddenly dawned the truth upon the anxious pair of watchers.

"He's looking for us, of course!" cried Bliss. "He has seen the crippled ZR-5. He realizes she is out. Also he has sighted the land. Being no fool he perceives that the Skipper would not give up so close as this. A sledge dash is the natural thing to be resorted to."

"But what's the sense of his finding us even if he does figure we're on our way?"

"Simply he wants to be on the safe side. Unscrupulous as he is he would think nothing of dropping down here and putting a crimp into our expedition if it suited his plans."

"I know," persisted McAlford, "but why doesn't he go straight on for the land?"

Bliss laughed shortly. "Simply because it's his game to build a reputation for decency. Once he makes sure he stands no chance to lose from a sledge party he can go back and slime himself around the ZR-5. Offer help and sympathy and the like. . . . Anyway his presence here is our cue to hide until he's gone."

Back swung the plane to a course that would bring it

directly over the two. Quickly Bliss hacked some ice blocks from the nearest upthrust. By spreading these loosely over the sledge and load he camouflaged them into rubbish of the pack.

Fifty yards away was a low berg frozen into the main floe. One side had been lately split by pressure. To this refuge they dashed, for it promised concealment from the searching plane above them.

Nearer sped the plane. Peering through a crevice overhead Bliss saw it turn. For an instant his heart stood still. Had Welchor seem them after all?

"If so, he'll simply slide along to the land," he muttered. "An hour from now he'll stand there and gloat over how he's tricked us all!"

"Shut up!" whispered Scotty, craning his neck.

"Do you imagine he can hear, you idiot?" chuckled Bliss. . . .

Their hiding place proved successful. A few turns more and the plane turned sharply west. Apparently her occupants had concluded their road was clear. Now they could afford to mock their victims on the ZR-5 with urgent offers of help, and with false sympathy and encouragement.

With a sense of vast relief Bliss wormed clear of the crevice. As he stepped out an iron grip closed about his neck and he was yanked back bodily into the hole.

"Holy trunnels, look at that!" gasped Scotty behind him.

Near the sledge stood a bear. A huge thick-necked polar bear the size of a Texas steer with a chest spread twice as broad. It had discovered the hidden camp gear. Around the pile of ice it walked, warily and in doubt. It sniffed. Gingerly reaching out with one massive paw it removed a lump; withdrew; sniffed audibly; removed another.

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"And the rifle's in the pack!" groaned Bliss. Even the ax and hunting knives were there. Unarmed and helpless the two men watched.

Presently the bear turned and raised his coal-black nose. He was directly to leeward. Whiff of a strange odor pricked his quivering nostrils. He became for one long moment a frozen image, a milk-white statue against blue ice behind. Then with a roar that reverberated through the crevice where huddled the two very embarrassed travelers the creature reared up and started for them.

"Say," sputtered Scotty, "I'm going to beat it!"

But Bliss seized his arm before he could escape. "Don't be a fool!" he hissed. "A bear can always outrun a man. He'll get you before you've gone fifty yards."

"But he'll murder us if we stay here!"

"Listen," Bliss curbed his friend's panic, "you stay here. I am thin enough to squeeze through the far end of this crack. Keep the bear amused. I'll make a sneak around behind the berg and get the gun."

"*Keep the bear amused!*" wailed McAlford. Bliss chuckled. "Oh, very well," sighed Scotty resignedly. "But if you come back and find Mister Bear and me in a nice little game of pinochle, don't butt in!"

Worming his way through the narrow space behind, Bliss put the berg between himself and the aroused animal. Judging by the snarls and snorts from the other side McAlford must be engaging the bear's attention with success.

A short dash and he reached the sledge. He snatched the rifle from its case. The bear heard and turned. His roar of anger at such trickery was bloodcurdling. For a moment he hesitated, torn between lust for the trapped McAlford's blood, and fury at Eppley's unexplained intrusion. Bliss knelt, took long aim just under the shaggy

shoulder, and fired. The bear sprang up and stiffened. Pawing madly at its breast it staggered back a pace. Then with one great gasping gulp it thudded down upon the floe, stone dead.

Mystery of the footprint was now clear. For near the sledge where the bear had trod a yielding snow patch they found the same broad bootlike hollow that Scotty's startled eyes had seen an hour before.

There was no time for butchering the fine animal. The beautiful skin must be abandoned. "Another time," was Eppley's rueful thought, "and I'd have a trophy worth bragging about!"

Yet bruin served his purpose. For with the excitement of his kill and a sirloin from his flank they pushed on almost gayly.

Unbroken marching does not lend itself to words. In war the soldier plods and talks. From out a farmhouse women run and wave. Dogs bark. Men faint for weariness. Another troop winds by. . . . All sustaining tonics in the long day's grind.

Not so with sledging on the polar pack. Peary, crossing the Greenland ice cap with Astrup as his sole companion, wrote: "One walked ahead that the other might fix his gaze on some specific object. Else in the empty desert we should have gone mad."

With going good Eppley trudged ahead an hour. Then came five minutes, halt and relaxation. Next an hour, McAlford in the van, Eppley pushing sledge. And so on, a deadly unbroken toil over ice, more ice, an infinitude of ice. Naught else. . . .

At noon the smoke cloud east showed at its base a red-brown dab of color streaked and splotched with white; land snow buried. By three the dab was clearly land, a lofty conical peak sharp cut against the sky.

At early evening—the arctic sun still high and bright—

a high ridge cut the trail at nearly a right angle. From the summit of it, sixty feet above the pack, the explorers got their first good view of their discovery.

The volcano seemed to mark the land's southern extremity. From it, northward as far as the eye could reach, spread an undulating plain. Further inland were visible snow-clad peaks in disorderly array whose conic outlines defined them also as volcanic. The one ahead, however, bore the only sign of active fire. Dense black billows rolled skyward from its crater and drifted with the light southwestern breeze.

To Bliss's "We can't stop here!" McAlford responded with a groan. He was reaching his limit of physical endurance. For the past two hours he had been limping. Only by dogged determination had he even kept his feet.

Another hour of torment and the land seemed close enough to touch. At the base of the volcano could be seen a high black cliff that sprang vertically from the sea ice.

Knowing his friend was close to the end of his tether Bliss suggested pushing ahead alone.

"Welchor may come any minute now," he pointed out. "And there's a haze down south I don't like. We mustn't get caught in fog when we are practically there. I'll make for the northern end of the cliff, take possession of the land, and wait for you there."

McAlford, scarcely able to speak in the extremity of his exhaustion, assented. He suggested the rifle and food. "Can't tell what may happen. Remember the bear," he said bravely.

But there was only one rifle. Eppley would be on the move. It was a risk, to be sure. But he of the two had the greater chance to sidestep danger. Moreover, should Welchor's plane come now all would be lost. So it was agreed he should go on unarmed.

Despite the precious minutes it took, tea was brewed before the separation. Over his steaming cup Bliss spoke a final warning.

"If you sight them try to flag them down. Run in circles; wave your arms. Do anything to attract their attention, except you mustn't shoot at them."

"Why not?" asked Scotty in sudden savage vigor at the hot tea's stimulation.

"Because even in exploration there are ground rules that have been observed since the beginning of time. Welchor may be a scoundrel and murderer himself, but that is no reason why we should descend to his level."

And so they parted.

A few hours later, just as Eppley had suggested, McAlford spotted the plane once more headed for the land. Whereupon he proceeded vigorously to carry out the instructions he had received to attract her occupants' attention. Despite his failing strength he dashed from the tent, raced across the floe and back, sprang into the air, and generally behaved like a wild man and a whirling dervish combined. His antics were soon successful. The machine swerved and dipped.

"This may give Bliss an extra hour at least," he muttered. "If only I can keep these ginks entertained!"

The plane drifted noiselessly upon the floe, ran swiftly for a hundred yards, slowed and stopped. Welchor clambered out, followed by his accomplice Scammell. Both were attired in the latest style of flying suits, putting up a smart contrast to the barbarous-looking sledger.

"Hello, McAlford," Welchor greeted him enthusiastically and came forward, hand outstretched. Scotty ignored it.

"All got grouches," sneered Scammell just behind him. "What's the use of fooling with them?"

"Shut your trap, Scammell!" snapped the former.

"You have the worst grouch of all!" Turning to McAlford, "I think it's pretty tough luck you've had, old man," he observed sympathetically. "We stopped back there by the ZR-5. She certainly is a wreck. I don't know whether you know it or not, but she had an explosion after you left and is now done in for good. The crew are going to start for land at once. I shall send out a relief party on my return."

"What—how did it happen?" stammered Scotty, finding his tongue at last.

"Can't say. Those dirigibles are always getting into trouble. At any rate, there is no sense in your trying to reach her again. Captain Devon told me to tell you and Eppley that he would appreciate it if you would accompany me back to Point Barrow and help us with our plans for rescuing the airship's crew."

"Did he send me a note?" inquired Scotty suspiciously.

"Note? . . . Not that I know of. Scammell, did you see any note?"

The evil-visaged mechanic grinned. "Not me, boss. What's the bird giving you anyway? Seems to think we're a pack of liars and crooks, just as his friend the Lootenant did."

"Which you certainly are," said Scotty to himself. Aloud he retorted coldly: "And you've decided to give up the idea of the flight across the Pole? You seem a good ways off your course."

Welchor lit a cigarette and shrugged condescendingly. "Not at all, McAlford. My idea is to go on to the land which you must realize we have sighted as well as you. It is only a short hop from here. We shall take possession of it and plant our flag—"

"What flag?" broke in McAlford, remembering Eppley's story.

But the other was not to be taken off his guard. "Our

own flag, of course!" he snapped. "Which did you suppose?"

"*Scandihoovian?*" inquired Scammell with a sardonic grimace of his ugly mouth.

Welchor glanced towards the tent. "Your friend Eppley asleep?" he asked.

Scotty's eyes did not flicker. "Yes," he lied promptly and heartily. "The poor devil tumbled off a berg this afternoon and sprained his ankle. Nasty twist. The pain of it pretty well did him up. Now he's just dropped off."

A shade of relief crossed the other's face. "Too bad, too bad," he murmured. "You men have made a good try too. Another day and you would have reached the new land first. . . . Oh, well, exploration has always been a gamble."

To Scotty's dismay Scammell started towards the tent. His first thought was to head him off with threat of physical violence. But that would only have betrayed the absence of Eppley at once. Further, the two of them, he could see, were armed. Once they realized that they had been tricked there would be no delay about their departure. To play for time was his only hope.

"By the way," he said quickly, "did you know that your radiator was leaking when you came down?"

Scammell stopped in his tracks. Probably some vision of the damage he had already arranged for the Belgian plane entered his mind.

Examination of the radiator occupied at least five minutes. Fortunately for McAlford's ruse it actually did need some water, though not enough to require refilling.

At this point another scheme presented itself. Why not disable the plane? The emergency food and traveling equipment the two men carried were inadequate for a long trip across the ice. They would be in the same posi-

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tion that he and Bliss were. And now that the ZR-5 was out of the race completely they could not fall back upon her. One escape would be left them: to reach the north coast of Canada before the open water of summer came, if it had not come already.

The objection to such a move lay in the fact that Bliss was ahead alone and with practically nothing in the way of food or means to subsist himself. There would be no sense in defeating Welchor and Scammell if Bliss were also put in a position from which he could not escape alive even if he did reach a new land.

Solution of the situation came from a wholly unexpected source. Out of a cloudless sky snow began to fall. Large slow-falling flakes that turned Welchor and Scammell upon one another with looks of anxious inquiry.

"Snow!" ejaculated the former.

Scammell drew on his mittens with a jerk. "Means we've got to shoot for it, boss! I'm not going to take a chance on landing on shore ice in thick weather."

Welchor glanced apprehensively eastward. The land still stood out clear and beckoning through the thin mist.

"I should say not! Come on, get aboard."

Scammell had one foot on the wing step to mount when the thought occurred to him, "Got to have one last look at that mutt who punched my eye. Maybe he'll apologize," he muttered.

"Better not waste time," warned Welchor. But Scammell was already trotting across to the little tent. Scotty braced himself for the shock.

"*He's not here!*" yelled the man a moment later, and came running. "The dirty liars! I knew they'd pull something like this! Knock his block off, boss! He deserves it!"

Welchor clambered out, his face purple with rage.

"Is that true?" he snarled.

"Go to hell," grinned Scotty.

"You *liar!*" hissed the other.

With a gesture of finality Scotty hurled his cigar stump into the snow. "Take that back," he said slowly. "Or, by God, I'll—"

"You will?" retorted the other, drawing a pistol from the pocket of his leather jacket. "No. . . . I guess you won't. Now turn around before I plug you the way you deserve to be plugged. *American sportsmen!*" The words were drawled with contempt. "Biggest bunch of liars I ever had the pleasure to deal with! Eh, Scam?"

"Don't see why you don't fix him here and now!" snapped the other hotly.

Welchor paid no heed. "We may see your friend, Eppley," he went on. "If we do we'll settle several little business deals with him at one sitting. If we don't—just tell him that the reason I waited over a day before leaving Point Barrow was to meet Miss Beckett. Tell him she'll be glad to hear I've reached the new land first because she expects to marry me when I get back."

A moment later with a roar the plane slid eastward on the crystal floe, sprang lightly to wing, and disappeared in the thickening snowfall.

Stupidly McAlford stood staring after her. Not until he shivered with the cold did he regain his senses enough to haul out a fresh cigar and light it with slow and stupid movements.

"Pleasant acquaintances to have," he said solemnly after his third puff. Then he turned and entered the topsy-turvy tent where Scammell had searched with such brief violence for the missing Eppley.

"Poor devil!" he groaned. "Heaven help him if they lay hands on him!"

CHAPTER XVI

FOOTPRINTS!

MEANWHILE Bliss Eppley fought his hard way onward. Pain of his aching muscles was numbed by the intensity of his determination to reach the land before Thorne Welchor. So close now was the race that if McAlford failed to detail the fliers, as Bliss had instructed him to do, only the intervention of Providence could prevent utter failure. The grim thought spurred him on.

Gradually the shore ice became visible. Rough high ridges skirted the foot of the cliff. With throbbing feet he threaded his way slowly around and over the icy obstacles in his path.

Northward rolled the run and still no plane. The softening evening glow illuminated the towering ramparts ahead. So lofty were the precipitous heights that on close approach they hid the smoking peak behind them.

Again and again Bliss looked back. If not the plane, why not the ZR-5? She should have been got running at least by now. In a few hours she could cover what it had taken the marchers two long days to do.

"Maybe the Skipper nabbed Welchor while he had the chance!"

The thought cheered him on. The welcoming land ahead was clear in all its details. Low round hills above the southern peak, and the inland ranges tipped with pink as the sun slid lower in the north. A new land indeed. Not like the dull unbroken barrens of North America

either, Bliss realized with a thrill. But subtly different. More fiercely lined, perhaps. More mysterious in its outward ruggedness. More grim and forbidding in its hidden vastness beyond the towering mountains. What secrets did it hide? What new riches? What new race of men or monsters roamed the snowy wilderness within its frozen boundaries?

A lead of open water stopped the plodding man. But a detour brought him to a bridge. Anxiety swept him. Would the ice run clear to land? Must he fail with the goal in sight?

A hush deeper than the former silence fell about him. His seaman's sense of weather told him the wind was shifting. It had been but a breath. What was coming now? He turned apprehensively. A damp morsel of snow touched his cheek. Then another. Yet the sky was clear save for a slight haze. Then gently as the fall of autumn leaves great gliding snowflakes slid noiselessly out of the air. Slowly the land ahead faded. He caught through the thickening curtain a last looming shadow of the black cliff for whose northern end he headed. Quickly he took a bearing.

Then out of space sifted a distant sound. A familiar hum. A note that brought the plodder's heart into his mouth. Made him grit the words that escaped his blistered lips:

"The plane! God give me strength!"

His first move was to spring to cover behind a tilted pinnacle of ice. Shore of the new land was still nearly a quarter of a mile away. If the plane were going on to it the race was lost. But if Welchor should choose a more prudent course in the sifting snow, and utilize one of the smooth though narrow lanes between the pressure ridges for a runway, there was still a chance.

The buzzing motor passed overhead, invisible in the

gray murk. Bliss' heart sank. Most likely Welchor would crash in making land. But that was trifling as compared with his reaching there first.

But just as the sound overhead was diminishing in the direction of the shore it suddenly became a crescendo again.

"He's going to use the ice!" cried Bliss, and hugged himself in an ecstasy of delight.

Suddenly the motor shut off. Down out of the skurrying flakes sailed the large dark shadow of the plane. With a little pang of admiration for the pilot's nerve the crouching watcher realized that nothing short of a miracle could prevent disaster. Yet just that miracle happened. For on the edge of visibility to the southward the plane came to a stop and two bundled figures clambered out.

Instantly Bliss was off. Like an Indian he dodged from cover to cover. Time and again he stumbled. Twice his face was badly cut by collision with knifelike edges of the floe. Once he ripped the knee of his breeches and left a crimson smear on the snow when he staggered half stunned to his feet. But he kept on at a pace unslackened by his suffering.

In his physical exhaustion tears streamed down his cheeks. Both hands and feet were bruised and numb. The last fifty yards he crawled on hands and knees.

As half fainting he crept up over the last tide-crack's crevice he heard voices behind him, angry voices. His trail had been discovered. But he had won.

Just a boulder, a cold brown knob projecting through the snow, was all that showed: but Bliss Eppley lay upon it sobbing, his lips pressed to its ice-scoured surface. For he had reached the new land first; and this boulder was part of it. Fumbling in his pocket he drew forth the tiny silk flag soggy with his sweat. He spread it on the

boulder where in the cold it soon stiffened as if with pride at its owner's heroic achievement.

When the two pursuers came Bliss drew upon that decimal of his remaining strength and rose unsteadily.

Scammell reached him first, and made as if to strike the helpless victor. But Welchor, more controlled, elbowed his man away. Whereupon the former snarled:

"You fool! You would go back and mess with those liars!"

The next instant Scammell sprawled upon his back from Welchor's blow.

"That's the trouble with you, Scammell! You lose your head!" snapped the latter, still panting from his climb over the rough ice. He turned to Eppley. "So you think you've beat us, do you?" he sneered.

Bliss grinned crookedly. "I don't think it, I know it."

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, does it occur to you that instead of winning you've only cooked your goose for good?"

Eppley's jaw squared definitely despite his battered cheek. He shook his head.

"Very well, then, permit me to tell you that your friend McAlford has started back. I promised him I would pick you up." Welchor chuckled cruelly. "Which, my lad, I am certainly not going to do."

"I should hope not," ventured Scammell from a safe distance.

"There was an explosion on the dirigible. Her crew have already set off for land. Food was left at the wreckage for you and your friend."

For the matter of a second or so Bliss's heart stood still at hearing this fearful tragedy. Then, with the impact of reason upon the knave's words, he saw the falseness of them.

Welchor's coarse lip curled. "And you're going to

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stay right here where you've got yourself to and freeze to death. I don't have to raise my hand against you. The way I figure it is that you're being punished for interfering with my plans. How about it, Scam?"

"Absolutely. If he'd left us alone—"

"Go to hell!" broke in Bliss weakly and sat down.

Welchor shook his head in mock commiseration. "Too late for any more of your dramatics, my friend. Now just sit there and think it over. Come on, Scam."

"Absolutely. Even if he doesn't freeze he hasn't any witnesses to prove he got here first, has he?"

"None at all," growled the other.

When the pair had disappeared in the direction of the plane Bliss continued to sit. As Welchor had pointed out his case was practically hopeless. Even if he were rescued he could not well prove he had first reached the new land and so claim it for his country.

The snow continued. And while the cold was not intense the strain of his recent physical effort combined with the damage to his footgear and clothing caused him to shiver pitifully. No food nor fuel, no camp gear, not even a spare mitten to replace the one that hung in shreds from his right wrist: his circumstances could not have been more terrible.

But apprehension for his own personal safety was dwarfed by the sense of abysmal failure that oppressed him. Welchor would now, no doubt, go back to Point Barrow as quickly as possible and inform the world of his discovery. The momentum of his claim would gain tremendously by its priority without regard for any proof that might subsequently be demanded. Indeed, as far as proof was concerned, Bliss well saw the hopelessness of trying to establish his own claim. His and Scotty's very lack of equipment and means of travel that Captain Devon would have to bear witness to would detract from

the possibility of his ever being believed. Further, Welchor could always bring out the fact that Bliss himself was a party to duplicity and intrigue.

He tried to comfort himself with the thought that McAlford would join him as soon as the weather cleared. He pictured the ZR-5 arriving despite her injuries and the explosion that Welchor had pretended had taken place. But no amount of such thinking could keep back the prying fingers of the cold.

Again he struggled to his feet and swung his numbing arms. There was no feeling in his toes. His fingers burned as if they had been scorched by fire.

A low thudding came through the scurring fog of snow. Welchor was starting up his motor. He must be in a hurry to take such risk as going aloft in these conditions. And he would be in a hurry only if the dirigible were still in the race. A hurry to get back to Alaska and report his lying tale of having discovered the new continent.

At this moment with a twinge of fear Bliss suddenly became aware of the fact that his thoughts were drifting along without concern for his plight. His bodily discomfort was decreasing. All of which could mean but one thing: the numbing effect of cold and exhaustion was getting in its deadly work.

At once he took an experimental step forward. "Ouch!" he cried involuntarily as pains shot through his legs and back.

Thus had his anxiety been well founded. For, paradoxical as it may seem, there is no gentler death than that by freezing. Had he settled upon the rock he'd hugged so short a while before he might have gone happily to sleep forever, thinking reasonable thoughts and thoroughly contented with his lot. Such has been the experi-

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ence of those few who have been lucky enough to have been rescued just before the sleep of death began.

He tried to walk, but with poor success. He tried to beat warmth again into his freezing hands. Snow drifting into the knee of his breeches melted and ran in a frigid stream down one leg.

"Scotty can't possibly be here until this snow stops," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I've got to stay alive till then. If I die no one can stand in the way of that scoundrel's story. *I've got to stay alive!*"

Then his heart sprang into his throat. . . .

At his feet on the alabaster snow, the virgin white mantle of the lands, spread a crimson stain. He stooped, touched the stain with trembling fingers. It was blood.

Nor was that all. He glanced beyond the blood. Vestigial hairs in the furrow of his spine stood erect. . . . *Footprints* everywhere! Tramping the snow down. Footprints of a score of human beings—two-score—loitering about! Some large, some small. All distinct from either of the white men's narrow marks. Breathing heavily, aghast, unutterably dismayed, he looked in a vague dumbfounded way about him. Snow-filled beach, high cliffs, gray sky, mocked his fevered eye.

Footprints everywhere!

Swaying as if in the gentle wind that blew he stood and looked. In a stupid sort of way he shook his head. A half-smile twisted his expressionless mouth. Slowly he sank to his knees, tottered for a moment, then stretched face downward in the snow.

Voices roused him. As if from a great distance he strained to recognize them. Perhaps the ZR-5, perhaps Welchor, had come. But on opening his eyes his blurred vision told him these many figures were strangers. . . .

Gently he felt himself lifted. Whereupon again he sank into oblivion.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOST TRIBE

THE village lay in a shelflike hollow halfway up the southern slope of the volcano. It consisted of two-score small white houses of stone arranged nearly in a semicircle about a central park or common. A luxuriant growth of coarse shrubbery filled the spaces between the houses and was cultivated in curving geometrical figures around the border of the park. The deep luxurious green of this vegetation brought out in vivid contrast the rich red of the towering cliff against which the little settlement nestled:

Southward the mountainside sloped declivitously to the white ice pack far below, which spread in a great glimmering sheet towards North America, half a thousand miles over the horizon. Above the red cliff this same slope continued to the summit where the volcano's crater smoked blackly into the blue vault of the cloudless sky.

The scene was one of life and gayety. Children of all ages ran and sang and danced about. Their laughter was echoed by the myriad birds that swarmed the cliff face above them. Strolling to and fro were tall fair-haired women mostly young, blue eyed and rosy cheeked. All wore simple smocklike garments of a soft brown wool. Great shaggy dogs, larger than St. Bernards and far keener in expression, lolled sleepily here and there, or wandered out into the snow patches beyond the village limits where they might cool their hot bodies. From somewhere came the music of a harp blending with sev-

eral splashing waterfalls which fell in silver strands from snow fields higher up. Peace and tranquillity reigned. Happiness was personified in the scene. Contentment showed in the serene expressions of the women. Joy of living was the keynote of the peals of merry laughter that rose and fell from out the kaleidoscopic groups of boys and girls.

Exactly opposite the center of the semicircle of low habitations was a gaping hole in the cliff. From the shadowy depths of this cavern issued strange muffled sounds as if a great factory existed therein. A humming noise was chief among these sounds. One would say on hearing it that machinery of some sort turning rapidly could only account for its origin.

Abruptly the noises, except the humming, ceased. As if by signal the women and children came to sudden halts in their movements. All stood and gazed in tense anticipation at the aperture whence the mysterious sounds had come. A hush fell upon the village. Even the dogs and the birds seemed to partake in this strange silence. Then from out the shadows of the cavern appeared a group of slow-moving white figures.

The hush deepened. The girls and women craned their necks. Children worming their way between the legs of their elders stared curiously towards the cave.

When the figures came into daylight it was clear that they were men. Like the women they, too, were very tall. They had long blond hair and yellow beards that in some cases stretched to the belts that held their short shirt-like garments to their bodies.

Bliss, peering down upon the strange scene, gasped. The spectacle upon which he gazed was so astonishing, so far beyond anything his imagination had been able to see in advance, that he pinched himself twice till he winced before he was at all sure that he was not dreaming

and would soon wake up again to the horror of the lonely pack and bitter cold. . . .

Blond Eskimos? But they couldn't be Eskimos, these tall, superbly-built and handsome men and women! Then flashed back the tale so often he had tried to make his friends believe. Tale of the Norsemen on the Greenland coast five centuries before. Happy, thriving, prosperous colonists. Abandoned without warning by the mother country. Compelled for generations to do without the luxuries to which they were used. Doomed, it seemed, forever to the long and sunless night, the bitter cold, the awful lifeless North. . . . A generation, two perhaps, of heartbreak and of longing. Unhappiness goading the younger men to travel northward. Perhaps a route to southern lands lay that way. . . .

"And they found this!" he cried.

He scrambled to his feet. He trembled. The wonder of it all struck him as might a blow. Stunned and speechless he stood and gazed in rapture at the lovely scene. Not in all the ages had men found anything like this! The mystery of it! The surpassing tragedy and drama of this epic of human castaways! His heart beat as if it would burst his ribs. His breath came and went with a ridiculous irregularity. How the papers had shrieked the news of Tut-ankh-amen's tomb! A hole in the ground contained the shriveled mummy of one man, with but the ghastly relics of his death strewn in tatters all about him. How the world would thrill at this! Live men and women who had never heard of the United States! Six centuries of history for them did not exist save as their cloistered generations on this isolated continent could know them!

As in a dream he glanced at the sledge on which he had been lying when consciousness returned. It was of a pattern he had never seen. The group of silent men

in furs behind him were apparently hunters. On another sledge was lashed the body of a dead seal. This explained the blood on the ice.

A great shout broke the silence. A chorus of cries, a swelling volume of human chatterings of surprise, came up to meet him. Stiff from his recent labors and still half incredulous he descended the slope towards the greensward.

An elderly man came forward. He was close to seven feet tall. His flowing hair and beard were white. His ruddy cheeks and piercing blue eyes, combined with the soft form-fitting shirt of brown wool that covered him to his knees, made him a striking figure. One could imagine him erect on the poop of a Viking ship, eyes shaded towards new land that beckoned his kind ever on.

He spoke a few words in a strange tongue. Bliss shook his head. Again the Viking spoke. This time his words sounded somehow as if they might be of Latin derivation. With a smile Bliss nodded his incomprehension.

Then to his astonishment there issued from the giant's lips a greeting in plain English, perfectly enunciated.

"Welcome, stranger. Do I now speak the language of your country?"

For a moment the dumbfounded explorer could only gasp. Then, so comically that several of the women laughed outright, he responded:

"Why—why it is—*exactly!*"

Whereupon the speaker addressed his fellow tribesmen briefly before turning again to Eppley and adding kindly: "Forgive me, but they are consumed by curiosity to know from whence you come. Not all can speak your language yet."

A shout from the hill above interrupted. Glancing upward along the trail from which the hunters had just

descended Bliss saw to his delight the unmistakable figure of McAlford seated astride the leading sledge of another party. The next moment Scotty's arms were about him, his lusty voice bellowing in his ear:

"Why, you old ham-bone! Thank God you've turned up at last! I thought you were done for by those murderers on the ice!"

"The same with me, Scotty!" he responded thankfully. "Did you see where I landed? You know I beat them to it by the skin of my teeth."

"Bully for you!" roared the other, and wrung his friend's hand. "I should say I did see where you landed! And when I also saw blood on the ice I expected to find your mutilated body behind the first rock!"

"Nothing but a seal my friends killed," laughed Eppley. "The hunting party I fell in with."

"But didn't Welchor and Scammell find these people?"

Bliss shook his head. A mask of firmness overspread his countenance.

"No; they thought they were leaving me to die. Welchor even laughed at me. You see the last mile or so was pretty awful. I was all in. I heard the plane coming. I was soaked with sweat. But I knew I still had a ghost of a chance. They overtook me just as I dragged myself ashore. I scarcely had the strength to stand. When the two scoundrels came running across they discovered me there and they were furious. They swore and stamped around.

"Then Welchor got off a bit of the finest melodrama I've ever seen on or off the stage. He called me a lot of names, and pointed out that even if I thought I'd beat him I had another think coming. I might have got to land first; but it wasn't going to do me any good because I'd never reach home to tell the tale!"

"So he just decided to let you stay and freeze?"

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"Exactly. Allowed as how that was a fitting end for a buttinski like me!"

"Then he flew back?"

"Yes. And since you didn't hear him go over I suppose he must have made a *détour* to the northward in order not to pass near the dirigible. I was freezing. I knew you wouldn't be along until next day. I was terribly drowsy. I lay down against my will and drifted off to sleep. Later I heard dogs barking and men's voices. I was too weak to rouse myself. I think they must have doped me. I smelled a sweetish odor. The next thing I knew I was lying on a sledge up here on the hill."

Bliss paused. By this time he and McAlford were surrounded. The towering old fellow who had courteously stood aside during the reunion of the two Americans now spoke again.

"I am Hroar Holgrimson, Leader of the Tribe," he explained with becoming dignity. "We bid you welcome. A house will be placed at your disposal during your stay. No doubt you would prefer at once to rest. Both food and a change of clothing will be brought at once. Is there anything else you would ask at this moment?"

Bliss and Scotty exchanged meaning glances. The food and clothes could wait. Something else could not. That something was their uncontrollable curiosity.

"Tell him how we came to be here," whispered Scotty. "And maybe he'll tell us what we want to know. How they got here. And how in thunderation he ever learned to speak English."

Bliss nodded. To Hroar Holgrimson he said: "Thank you and your people very much for your cordial welcome. My friend wishes me to tell you that we are here more by accident than design, being members of an exploring party that is now marooned upon the ice. As you know

our language you must have knowledge of our country. Would you consider it an affront if we beg for some explanation of your unexpected presence in a land so far from—from—" Bliss hesitated. "From civilization," he added weakly.

For reply Holgrimson chuckled heartily. "'Civilization'?" he echoed. "Now that is a word about which we have puzzled much." He waved his hand. "But that for another hour. For the moment, the chronicle of my people. I cannot blame you for your curiosity. That we are here upon this ice-beleaguered isle is one of the miracles in the history of mankind. Here, join me on yonder bench and I shall briefly relate what you would hear."

Whereupon, like two great gaping boys, the newcomers sat enchanted by the marvelous tale Holgrimson poured into their ears.

That these people were descendants of the lost Norwegian colony of Greenland was quite true. But the facts of their emigration to this land were materially different from what Eppley's speculation had led him to believe.

From the earliest settlement of South Greenland, so their records showed, the Eskimos had claimed the existence of a large continent in the Polar Sea which possessed a climate pleasanter than that of any other northern land. It abounded in game and was in many other ways an ideal place to live. Yet no native dared move to it on account of the terrifying "fire mountains" scattered through it.

"You see, Scotty," interpolated Bliss, "this place is really just another Iceland. Iceland has within its limits 107 major craters and countless minor ones. Of the major craters practically all have been active within historical times. Hot springs, geysers, and wells of boiling

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mud are found in every part of Iceland. Lava flows have frequently come suddenly from great fissures in the level plains."

Such then had apparently been the case with the traditional land of the Eskimos. So despite its salubrious climate they were unwilling to risk living in close proximity to live volcanoes.

The Norwegians discovered its true existence early in their stay in Greenland. Sledging parties visited it every year. The great loads of skin and gold and ivory they brought down accounted for the extraordinary prosperity the records in Bergen show. The whole thing was, however, kept a secret in order to discourage more colonists coming out from Norway and spoiling their monopoly of the rich field.

Then suddenly and without warning the ships from home stopped coming. At first there was no hardship. Norway by this time had no real sentimental value in their lives. Rather was she a customer who bought the colonist's goods in exchange for certain luxuries which were unobtainable in Greenland.

After some years a few sturdier and more independent spirits decided to wait no longer for ships from Europe. They packed up and set out for the polar continent. Yearly sledgers came down to the Greenland settlements to see if anything had been heard from the south.

A generation passed. The migration continued. Settlers in South Greenland having no market and living under the most rigorous conditions imaginable became poverty stricken and discontented. They realized that there was no sense in their remaining. Family by family they drifted north. By the year 1350 none were left.

The new land was not disappointing. To be sure, the dark period in winter was longer. But then, on the other hand, the months of endless sunshine were more numer-

ous. Something like two-score volcanoes were active. They were active in an amazing manner. They smoked and boiled, simmered and steamed. But they never overflowed. The vast circular basin—probably fifty miles in diameter—which they encircled quivered with the subterranean fires beneath it.

The colonists soon found that the fires never broke out. This was really evident from the very first because of the enormous herds of musk oxen, caribou, mammoths, bears, and other animals that roamed about. Also the dense vegetation testified to a long period in which the volcanoes had been quiescent.

Yet, while innocuous so far as life went, the "Mountains of Fire," as the Eskimos called them, were responsible for the incredible contrast between the temperature within the barrier and that on the polar pack without. Even in the long and sunless months of the winter the cold was never such that water froze, or plants died, or any discomforting chill descended upon the new arrivals.

Incredible as it may seem, so wild as to tax the most gullible imagination, the lucky Norsemen had become the proprietors of nothing more nor less than a steam-heated polar paradise. . . .

"Didn't I tell you so?" cried Bliss.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CATAclysm

“**F**ROM what they tell me,” resumed Hroar Holgrimson, “this part of the island, the central depression or bowl, was exactly like an enormous room with steam pipes running under its floor. It was heated up day and night by irregular intrusions of lavalike masses that were always hot, and which ran in long crooked veins across the plain.”

“But why wasn’t there the most tremendous condensation between cold air from the ice without and warm air from within?” put in McAlford, always the engineer.

There was, Hroar went on to explain. Indeed, this bank of fog eventually had a profound bearing upon the future of the new inhabitants for it discouraged their venturing again upon the outer ice. Was the gate of a trap, so to speak.

“Which is getting ahead of my story,” he said.

“For the first decade or so the Norwegians entered a perfect debauch of food and play. There was no reason to work. The game was perfectly tame. If a man’s family got hungry he just walked out of his tent and hove his lance at the nearest placidly grazing caribou. If the wife tired of meat there were a million eggs a few steps away among the rocks. If the baby was cold at night enough blue fox skins to cover him twice could be collected within an hour. . . . It was a land of milk and honey. Yet a land to poison the human soul. For the human soul in the aggregate cannot stand prosperity.

"The colony deteriorated; became flabby, discontented, quarrelsome, carnal, dissipated in every way. Family feuds broke out. Physical disintegration accentuated passions unbridled day by day. Where the struggle for existence and a wholesome business with the old country had held the colonies together in earlier years of their stay in Greenland the empty lives that all now led sapped the souls, the hearts, the very humanity out from the wretched immigrants who had settled in a paradise of all that man could dream of wanting.

"Records of this period are fragmentary. The intense emotional state of mind all were in shut out the natural reflective impulses that might have led to some orderly chronicle of events. Instead, there survives only a series of terrible death compacts entered into by various groups bent upon the annihilation of various other groups.

"The situation became that of Ireland of the Middle Ages: a number of feudal barons or kings, each a marauder upon all the others. Each an arrogant malevolent individual who fired his retainers to hatred and to war.

"Don't you see the horror of it? It was not much different from the world to-day, if you know what I mean. Here was a lump, you might call it, of human beings inhabiting what to them was a world. This world was fertile, productive, potentially rich beyond all dreams of avarice. With proper organization of raw materials such as skins and wool and minerals, the Norsemen could have had everything they wanted. Later developments proved it.

"Instead, a sort of concentrated international jealousy and cupidity grew up. One small group lived near the best grazing ground for musk oxen. Another had a corner, so to speak, on the fox-skin market. A third found fuel oil seeping from the ground right under the king's castle.

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"In the beginning each group traded with the others. It wasn't so much barter as it was handing out with happy generosity what the other fellow lacked. All were close friends, or even blood relations. Such a course was perfectly natural.

"Then, when the surfeit of things began to develop parasites among them, those who weren't parasites grew to be coveters. Those who couldn't be either began to be agitators. And between the three of them there was no peace. The pot began to boil. . . . Eventually it boiled over.

"Boiling over meant that the groups which had once formed one large family became, one after another, estranged. Within the first twenty or thirty years on the land a violent dispute broke out between the group that controlled the best bird-egg cliff and one which had been able to segregate all the milk-giving mammals. A sanguinary battle was fought. Neither side won. But the damage was tremendously deeper than just the blood that was shed.

"For the other groups that had been but onlookers became strangely hungry for more of the same sort of excitement. To watch a fight and yet not fight themselves was like hearing some one give way to uncontrollable laughter and not know the cause of his mirth. It gave them an uneasy feeling: they were being deprived of something.

"Battles—miniature wars—became more frequent. Men grew skilled in murdering one another. Women mastered the art of nursing. Children were beginning to be brought up with the idea of fighting when they got older.

"The record says that these children were not really supposed to fight. They were to be a protection in case of future war."

"It's exactly the same as we have now!" laughed McAlford.

"Exactly," admitted Bliss. "I told you this colony's story was an allegory of the world's whole history. But listen to what happened later."

"Things went from bad to worse," went on Holgrimson. "Always there seemed to have been a certain number of level-headed men and women who pleaded for peace. But they were put down as fanatics. Probably were fanatics. At any rate their efforts always failed. They didn't have influence enough to gain their point on one hand; on the other they were able to adduce no practicable solution of the problem.

"Then, somewhere between fifty and a hundred years after their first settlement of the land, a war broke out that involved all the groups or small pseudo-nations into which the colony was divided. None was neutral. Every man, woman and child was engaged directly or indirectly in effecting the destruction of every man, woman and child on the opposing side. It was a world war in a sense more profound than the real world yet has seen. Murderous hatred animated every action.

"Five hideous battles were fought. The mortality was ghastly. Blood stained the flowers of the fields. Screams of the dying rent the air. Black ravens swung above their carrion.

"The fifth battle defied description. Nearly all the men were dead or wounded. The women and children issued forth. They were maddened, insane, maniacal. They were almost unarmed. They tore each others' throats. They sucked the blood of their victims. They strangled each other's children. They swung newborn babies above their heads and dashed their brains out

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against the rocks. . . . A shambles too loathsome to imagine.

"At the climax of this sickening carnage the earth began to tremble. Groans of agony, stertorous breathing of the dying suddenly became hushed. From the bowels of the earth there came a distant rumbling thunder. Faces of the few living blanched in terror. For these were a superstitious people. Abruptly they realized their sin. The God whom they had forgot was now about to punish them.

"And punish them He did. The field of battle opened up. From a great fissure in the earth issued a gleaming flow of molten rock. With slow and hissing movement the lava spread. A sharper hiss, a brief and suffocating stench, and one by one the dead and dying were cremated where they lay.

"A few women, a mere handful of men, a few score orphaned babes and fear-stunned children escaped to the higher levels. Along with them ran in panic the beasts of the land; the placid caribou, the blustering white bears, the stupid musk oxen, the snorting mammoths, the playful foxes.

"For several years this remnant of humanity clung piteously together. Shock of what they had been through left them stunned and dejected. There was no attempt to set themselves up as a colony again. They barely lived. Most of the adults were afflicted with some nervous disorder or other. Some were paralyzed. Some mildly insane. All were subnormal.

"The younger generation matured. The paralytics and madmen and madwomen gradually died away. But for years they were horrible living examples of the frightfulness of the catastrophe that had overtaken their little world.

"It was not the volcanic eruption that impressed itself

upon them. Subterranean fires kept them warm, they knew. And these fires had remained under control until the people had so frightfully misbehaved. Hence, reasoned the rising generation, war must forever after be tabooed."

"But did nothing remain of the livable part of the island?" queried Eppley.

"That part of the story is yet to come. The first big eruption seems to have left the livable area of the island intact. The survivors from the cataclysm—the younger ones, that is—got together and set up a sort of democratic form of government. They worked out a crude constitution and elected a leader every ten years with a committee to assist him. This scheme is still in force.

"Of course progress was slow. Yet not slow as compared with our own civilization. They no longer had any sort of jealousy or hatred, or strife in any form, to disturb them. Education was developed. Natural science began to be studied. Physical science followed. Communal division of labor and responsibility were established.

"Time came—approximately two hundred years later—when a definitely national policy, a sort of practical philosophy was recognized and voted upon. When this was put into force there came control of population, of food and of raw supplies; of pastime as well as of toil. In a word, a sort of discipline for mind and body and soul was accepted by all, exactly the way you accept certain standards of morality and health in what you call your civilized world.

"In about 1783, the year of the great Iceland earthquake, by the way, another disastrous volcanic eruption occurred. That range of mountains you saw from the ice became a wall of fire. The great city which these people had built was wiped out. Practically all their

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laboratories and records were lost. It was a far more terrible catastrophe than the original one. Yet their morale was scarcely affected. For by this time they had deduced the geology of their island and had realized that eruptive forces are natural terrestrial mechanics beyond the control of man."

"Then why didn't they try to escape from this place when it blew up?" asked McAlford.

"They did try. The last eruption left them only this tiny refuge where you see us now. Recognizing that there must be a large unexplored area—unexplored by them, of course, in this sea of ice—it occurred to them that there might be some other land equally pleasant to inhabit. Further, there were still in their possession fragmentary descriptions of Norway and vague directions as to how to reach it.

"You understand that up to this point there had been no incentive for them to leave the land. But now they felt cramped. And despite the traditions among them to the effect that Greenland was a cold and dreary country, they sent out several expeditions in that direction. Many of these never came back. Strangely enough none encountered any of your arctic expeditions. One, however, but a few years ago reached the abandoned Greely headquarters in Lady Franklin Bay. There they found and brought back a quantity of books, scientific instruments, and other symbols of your southern civilization.

"To our horror we discovered war was a common thing among the nations south. The history of the development of the new world appealed particularly to us. Yet we shuddered at the bloodshed of your Civil War."

"But how could you read those books?" cried McAlford incredulously.

Holgrimson laughed. "You have yet to learn what it has meant to my people to work and to study undisturbed

for over four centuries. Our system of education is one of our greatest sources of pride. A normal boy of twelve always reaches the most advanced grade. To decipher a new language was the work of but a few weeks for our linguists."

"But the pronunciation," protested Bliss. "How on earth did you get that?"

"One thing at a time," said the Viking in a tone of amusement at his auditor's bursting curiosity. "You shall know all before you leave. When you have eaten I intend to take you through our laboratories in the cavern. We have done much with electricity. Indeed, we utilize the natural water power here so that our working hours have been reduced to two per man per day. Four hours' research and study per man and woman per day are required in addition. My people love that sort of thing."

"But how about—"

Holgrimson held up both hands in a gesture of entreaty. "Enough for the present, please, my friends. You have but a little time before the feast in your honor will be ready."

As the two turned to follow the guide that had been assigned them there broke out again from the cavern behind the village the unearthly humming sound so much like a plane at full speed. McAlford stopped dead in his tracks and seized his friend's arm.

"Bliss, do you realize that Welchor and Scammell will be back?"

Eppley turned a grave face in reply. "Do I realize it?" he groaned. "Well, I wish I didn't is all I can say to that." He laughed uneasily. "But let's not spoil our appetite, eh?"

"Right!" responded Scotty, and elevated his nose to an unmistakable fragrance of cooking that drifted down the wind.

CHAPTER XIX

KRISTINA

“**A**ND he’s much too fat. Also he hasn’t enough hair. Is it because he eats too much? Or because he doesn’t work hard enough?”

“No, Kristina, neither one,” chuckled Bliss. “The secret of the horror of my friend is that he smokes long black stinking cigars from one day’s end to the next!”

The girl’s silvery laughter filled the little house.

“Cigars? . . . Oh, yes, those rods of pressed and cut grass which you call tobacco.”

The object of this little exchange of pleasantries said nothing. He stood as he had arrived, dirty and ragged, and dumb with astonishment. Only this time his surprise was not diffused over a vast number of curious details, but concentrated on the exquisite creature before him.

Kristina, daughter of Hroar the Leader, had been assigned to care for the visitors and see that they were supplied with clothing, food, and all the other comforts the settlement provided. Service being the main object of life in the little colony, there was no such thing as a servant in the sense we use the word. All were servants. The happiest were those to whom came the greatest number of opportunities of making some one else happier or more comfortable. It must be added, however, in extenuation of the reader who shudders at the idea of continuous contribution to another’s contentment, that life in the new land was scarcely comparable to our own. So

far had scientific development of power and its application to lightening daily burdens of the people progressed, that occupation was really at a premium. Hence Kristina's task of caring for Eppley and McAlford was an honor and a joy to her even more than to the two men.

Like the others she bore unmistakable signs of her race. She was tall and slender and blue eyed. Her flowing hair was fair, her skin transparent. Her features were delicate. Her feet, hands, ankles, and wrists were so small as almost to appear fragile. Yet the grace and the ease with which she lifted the heavy driftwood table to one side of the tidy little room attested to the quality of the fibers that ran so supplely down her bare white arms. No itemized account of her beauty could half do justice to it. There was a composite exquisiteness about her that could not be put into ordinary words. The swift sunshine of her smile, the dancing mirth behind her cool eyes, the instantaneous responsiveness of her look and speech, were sufficient to numb a stronger man than McAlford into speechless subservience to her charms.

"Golly, Maud!" he muttered in his graceless way. "Call me all the names you like, my dear, if only you'll let me stand and look at you!"

Kristina turned in some surprise to Bliss. "He's never seen a woman before?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, plenty of them," explained Eppley graciously. "But he's just a little bit off his bean, the poor thing. Wait till you smell one of those cigars. He—"

"Off his bean? *Bean*—oh, yes, you eat beans!"

"No, Kristina, not that. In our country we don't take the trouble to learn all the expressive words in our language. We are lazy in that respect. So we resort to what we call 'slang,' which consists of a lot of words easy to remember, and which have two or three different

meanings depending on how we use them. Now Scotty's head is a bean because—"

"Aw, chuck it!" exploded the other. "She's a nice girl and you are going to spoil her with a lot of stuff like that. . . . Come on, Kristina, and show me how I get cleaned up in this hotel."

Hesitating for a moment, undecided whether the fat man was actually a lunatic or not, she suddenly bared her small white teeth in a whimsical smile and exclaimed: "Oh, but you are strange people!" To McAlford she added: "Hurry, big man, the banquet will be ready when the sun is high. You must be clean. Here are your clothes." She pushed a brown bag across the table. "Boots, shirt, everything."

The tiny house was built of reddish sandstone slabs joined together with a bright-blue mortar. Its door was also of stone, shaved exceedingly thin and swung on bronze hinges. It was divided into three rooms, all spotlessly clean. In fact, cleanliness and neatness were the most notable features of the whole settlement. The front room contained rough-hewn furniture of drift-wood, a table and three curiously shaped chairs, all artistically in keeping with the strange atmosphere of the place. A matting of soft, brown, plaited grass covered the walls. On the floor was a similar matting, shaded blue to match the mortar. A narrow fireplace was built diagonally into one corner, but there was no sign of andirons. On the mantelpiece over the hearth were several seabirds beautifully mounted in lifelike positions. Two small-paned glass windows admitted light.

The second room was evidently a bedroom. It had no furniture save two low couches covered with soft furs faintly scented by some fragrant perfume. Beyond was the bathroom. With a businesslike air Kristina showed how the deep depression at its center could be filled with

cold, sparkling water simply by standing upon a small dark stone set in the mosaic floor. She bubbled laughter when McAlford got down on his hands and knees and tried to see whence flowed the streams that poured in from all sides of the tub.

"Don't mind him," observed Bliss. "That's his business at home."

"To take care of tubs?" asked Kristina, much interested.

"Not exactly. His body is the only tub he takes care of."

She touched a knob in the wall. "This heats the water, big man," she explained.

"The deuce it does!" sputtered Scotty enthusiastically.

Bliss held up both hands in dismay. "Please don't get him started on the mechanics of it all, Kristina. Your father will take him to the laboratories this afternoon. This bald-headed friend of mine is crazy about machinery. You understand the word crazy?" She nodded.

"Then he should have none of it for a while," she said. "He should sit in the sun with me and play games and talk and laugh. That is the way we care for such a man."

McAlford sprang to his feet. "Then I'm done with machinery forever!" he cried, and seized one of the girl's white hands. "Sunshine and—"

"No—no, not yet!" Smilingly she pushed him away. "I shall have to ask Eric."

"Eric? . . . Say, Bliss, is she married?"

"No, but she seems to have a beau who counts for more than the old man. They've got a queer bunch of customs, as you will find out."

"Not queer," Kristina rebuked him gently, "but they are ours. Have you not yours in your country?"

The hot bath with real soap made a new man of McAlford. At least that is what he announced when he

rejoined the other two in the front room. But his remark fell unheeded. Bliss was entertaining the young lady with such a stream of description of the ZR-5 that she had no ears to spare.

Scotty stalked to the door, where he turned and announced: "All right, you two, I'm going to tell Eric, whoever he is, that he'd better look out for his girl."

Whether the threat worked or not, he at least was joined promptly by Kristina and led towards the banquet table which had been placed in the center of the park. It also was fashioned from slabs of red sandstone with blue trimmings where mortar or matting was used in its finishing. It was built in a long semicircle with several raised benches at the apex of its curve. To these benches the two strangers were led and seated on either side of Hroar Holgrimson, the towering Viking leader. At once the crowd arranged itself on the remaining benches and fell to vigorously upon the food.

The dishes and platters were all of polished bone or of glass and heaped with meat of various kinds. Any sort of vegetables were lacking except that boiled greens were dished out to the children.

The whole meal was marked by a great deal of laughter, an immense amount of jesting conversation, and a spirit of wholesome jollity and happiness that made the calm air ring.

Behind the benches wandered the huge shaggy dogs which apparently had been bred to their present size and strength from the original animals. Overhead swung countless bird swarms, fluttering like bits of white paper against the blue sky. The ice pack far below spread in a shimmering sheet towards North America. Music of the splashing waterfalls went on unbroken. Luscious scent of flowers and shrubs mixed its sweetness with the flavor of delicious viands.

"Can you beat it?" whispered Eppley.

"Beat it!" exclaimed his friend through a mouth half jammed with roast venison. "I only hope that scoundrel Welchor breaks his neck and never gets back again!"

During the meal Holgrimson pointed out many interesting features of the settlement that were not at once obvious.

"You will understand," he said a little sadly, "that we have greater problems now that the difficulties of securing food has increased. In the old days the colony occupied the center of the land, which was then a huge and fertile park. Our game was herded just as you herd your domestic cattle."

"We are starting that too," put in Bliss. "The Canadian Government is considering a project for the development and herding of musk oxen in its northern area. The reason we incline more to our cows is that, as you probably know, no wild animal gives a large amount of milk. Domestic cattle when allowed to run wild on the range give only from three to five pints of milk where the same cow would give four times that much under dairying conditions."

"Quite right, my friend," agreed Hroar. "But we were able to domesticate a portion of every species of wild game. For instance, we, that is my forefathers before the last great eruption, were able to use the white bears as draught animals in hauling heavy loads from place to place."

From the matter of food conversation turned to the division of labor. Both visitors found this of particular interest. Hroar directed their attention to the men seated about the table. He described the eugenic development of the colony whereby it had become possible to eliminate all individuals susceptible to disease or physical weakness of any sort.

"However," he concluded, "we cannot control the fibers of the brain. Such will likely always be the case. Some men will always live who take to manual labor rather than to mental exercise."

"But how do you preserve your equality then?" asked Bliss.

"By requiring all to do a certain amount of every kind of work. About half of our men are essentially hunters, the other half keep up to a large extent in their education; and we never permit the brain workers to carry their labors to the point of degeneration of their physical health."

A youth of sixteen or so stepped up and whispered into the old man's ear. When the latter nodded the boy dashed off. A few minutes later there rose from one end of the table the music of an orchestra. The melody it played was of haunting sadness, a curious contrast to the gayety about. While it continued, quiet was maintained among the feasters. Some wept. All sat with averted eyes and listened thoughtfully. Towards the end a crescendo of harsh notes broke with a crash into a brief dirgelike measure which in turn developed slowly to a refrain of such sweetness that Bliss turned to Hroar for explanation. At that moment all began suddenly to sing and their caroling was in keeping with the loveliness about them.

"The story of our colony," paraphrased Hroar. "We always sing it at our banquets. It recounts the tragedy of our early struggle, the dreadful wars, the holocaust, rebirth of peace, and our happiness since then."

Across Eppley's mind there ran the vision of a millennium in the world he knew. Would some day men and women of the races hating so to-day sing weepingly of the terrible past—the *present* for himself? It was a wonderful vision!

The music ceased. Dessert was brought to the table.

Before each place was served a fat omelette of auk's eggs surrounded by sweet patties of sugary caribou liver. Raw eggs were passed out to the boys and girls to suck as if they had been candy.

Now the table was cleared. Soapstone bowls containing water were brought. The benches were pushed back. Many of the diners stretched themselves comfortably upon the soft turf. Curious eyes had up to this point been turned upon the guests. Now there seemed for the first time a live interest in what might be expected of the two strangers. Kristina, leaning over to Bliss, whispered:

"It is now that you must speak to us."

The next moment her father rose and addressed the gathering. . . .

A moment of silence, then applause. Men banged on the table; women clapped their hands; children cried their welcome.

Came a sudden commotion on the outskirts of the gathering. The next second Bliss felt a tug at his sleeve. He looked down into the frightened face of Kristina. In a low tone, so beseeching that it struck apprehension to his heart, she said:

"Oh, do be careful what you say! It is Olaf the Hunter who comes!"

The commotion grew to an uproar. Dogs began to bark. Men shouted for quiet. Women divided their curiosity between the speaker and the curve of the hill beyond the village.

Then Bliss saw.

It was a column of dog teams, huge dogs driven fan-wise and attached to sledges piled with meat and skins. The drivers, gigantic in their traveling suits of fur, were flinging their long whips back and forth over their heads

with riflelike reports. The hunt had been tremendously successful. There must be a feast and rejoicing.

Bliss looked down puzzled at the frightened girl. She had been joined by a rather slightly built youth with a dreamy expression on his face.

"This is Eric," she explained, "the man I love. Yonder, leading the sledges, is Olaf who would have me for his wife. My father is undecided. Eric excels in the laboratories; Olaf in the hunting grounds. My choice is Eric, for the other—" She gave a little shudder. "Olaf is like the wolf. I do not trust him. I—" She paused, seemed to shrink away, clinging to the arm of the man she preferred.

Bliss glanced up. He found himself staring into the face of a man nearly twice his size, a face almost animal in its coarse hard features. By its high cheek bones and wide slit of a mouth he guessed an admixture of Eskimo blood. Possibly a throwback to some half-breed of the original immigrants. The man stared rudely. His very posture with wide-braced legs and hands on hips was insolent. His expression was contemptuous. He inclined his head towards Kristina, half hidden by the gaping in-pressed curious crowd. He growled a few words.

At once Hroar the Leader replied. Then he spoke in English. "Our visitors have come from a far country. They speak the language we are all learning."

Olaf grunted. He shrugged his thick shoulders. Then, glancing suddenly beyond Bliss to the table, he strode forward and seized a plate half emptied. He snatched the food greedily, held the plate aloft and hoarsely shouted for more.

"Say, Bliss," said McAlford in a low tone, "the rest of this is easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, when our dear friend Welchor comes back, as he will I'm very much afraid, we'll just tie him and yon brave Olaf together by their tails and let them scratch each other's eyes out!"

Bliss shook his head. The look in Kristina's moist blue eyes had gone to the roots of his heart. The future looked very complicated.

Hroar Holgrimson stepped up. "Now we'll show you and your friend the laboratories," he said.

Bliss thought he could detect a note of fear in the old man's voice. But he had not seen what Hroar Holgrimson's watchful eyes had caught.

Back among the emptied tables still stood Olaf the Hunter. Nearly hidden behind his hulking body cowered a frightened girl.

"So you would enlist these weaklings with the sad-eye of your choice?" growled Olaf harshly. His lips were smeared with caribou fat, a lump of which he rolled from cheek to cheek with gluttonous smackings.

"But my father bade me see them cared for," protested Kristina tearfully. "Please let me go."

"Let you go?" A brutal chuckle bubbled in the big man's corded throat. "Yes, to-day. Perhaps to-morrow also. But soon, my pretty birdling, the day shall come for us to leave forever. You and me. *Ah-ha!*"

Kristina caught her breath and shuddered; then sped towards her father who towered grimly across the way, arms folded, and alone.

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE CAVERN

THE entrance into the volcano behind the village was simply a square black opening about twenty feet high and correspondingly wide. Inside, its configuration was less regular, as if the original cavern had been a natural recess in the rock. As the two thrilled visitors later learned, this was actually the case.

As the daylight faded out behind them a soft phosphorescent glow took its place. The origin of this curious illumination was not clear. At Bliss' inquiry the elderly guide pointed out innumerable small cuplike depressions along the rocky walls, in each of which glowed a shaded torch emitting a bluish light.

"Electric lights," he explained. "But as far as I can gather, not the kind your nations have developed in the south."

Continuing down the long passage he went on to say that the colony had discovered electricity at least three centuries before, a full two hundred years prior to any accurate conception of it in Europe.

The old Viking smiled. "In this alone," said he, "you will perceive the striking result of isolation upon our scientific progress. We have been able to create a container so small that you can hold it in your hand; yet so powerful electrically that it will illuminate a house for a lifetime. One of these cells may be charged in a day at the source of power. It may be discharged in the fraction of a second with enormous violence; or it

may ooze current over a period of many years. But if released at one sudden shock it would burst as if it were an explosive."

He stepped aside into a storeroom. Switching on the same blue glow that filled the corridor without he pointed to a mass of small black boxes about a foot square piled high to the ceiling. There must have been several hundred of them.

"These are empty cells. We charge a great many during the summer in order that when the winter darkness comes we need not worry for light and heat. Moreover, their contained power provides a means to do any extra work that becomes necessary."

McAlford examined one of the cells with wondering eyes.

The party had now come to a fork in the passageway. Two branches ran out to right and to left, disappearing in long curves that seemed to agree with the outer surface of the mountain.

"You must understand that we did not build these caves," said Hroar. "They are simply spaces between the original layers of lava. Which reminds me: Do you hear that humming sound?"

Both nodded.

"One of the first things I noticed when I entered the settlement," observed Scotty. "I took it to be some sort of machinery that you have installed here."

Hroar Holgrimson shook his head. "No, that humming noise you hear is simply the magnified vibrations of the earth's interior."

"The *what?*" ejaculated Bliss.

Holgrimson smiled. "It is difficult to explain it when I am not familiar with your technical terms. But I know that recently you had what you call an earthquake in one of your countries."

INTO THE CAVERN

"Japan?" suggested McAlford.

"I think that was the place I mean. Anyway, living in an intensely volcanic country we have naturally taken much interest in the local manifestations of subterranean fires. In fact, we have learned by terrible experience that our very lives may depend upon knowing in advance when there is going to be an outbreak.

"Early in the development of our cells we discovered to our amazement that when one of them was supercharged to a certain pressure of electricity it gave off a peculiar humming note. At first we thought this was due to a sort of boiling effect on the contained charge. Then we found to our surprise that the note varied in pitch in proportion to the cell's distance from the volcano. One morning the whole settlement was aroused by a perfect bedlam of sound issuing from the storeroom in which we kept about a hundred of these very highly charged units. Within twenty-four hours the volcano was in eruption. Nothing serious; but violent enough to force abandonment of our laboratories.

"Subsequent study of the phenomenon showed that during volcanic activity the tonal qualities of the earth's crust became for a time immediately prior to the quake, and for a considerable period afterwards, profoundly disturbed. Then it is we have no longer the clear musical sound you noticed, but in its place a loud and raucous roar that makes a splendid warning for all people that might be in harm's way."

Silently Bliss and Scotty glanced at one another. The latter had been in command of a destroyer at Shanghai when the cry for help had come with such piteous feebleness from the shattered station just south of Yokohama. Bliss had witnessed at Messina the horror of one hundred thousand men, women, and children crushed or cremated without warning.

Holgrimson, seeming to read their thoughts, said: "It would mean real safety to thickly populated volcanic districts such as you have." After a moment he added with just a touch of irony: "But why save people just to be murdered in the wars you seem to love so much?"

For which there seemed no ready answer.

Now as their guide led on his step quickened. He nodded toward a door from which streamed a band of light brighter than any which they had yet encountered. The large room they soon found themselves in was arranged as an amphitheater. Curving rows of seats carved out of the solid rock ran up and back for at least two hundred feet. The whole colony could have been seated before the little square of brilliantly illuminated space on which the visitors stood.

At their entry Eric drew Hroar Holgrimson aside for a moment and whispered with unmistakable signs of agitation into his ear. Presently he came forward and held out his hand.

"I am saying to him that we should ask your pardon," he began in perfect English and with scarcely a trace of the strange accent the other had. "Olaf the Hunter was very rude to you when he arrived to-day."

"Oh, that was all right," smiled Bliss. But the other stopped him.

"No, my friend, it is not all right. We do not permit ourselves to be discourteous in the colony. I am afraid that Olaf's feelings got the better of him. You see, we are able to receive all messages that your southern countries spread through the air. We cannot send ourselves. But we understood thoroughly what you call radio emanations many years before you used them to transmit messages without wires."

"Then you must have known that we were sending airships out across the Pole!" broke in McAlford.

INTO THE CAVERN

"We did. We have been prepared for several years to welcome one of your flying machines on the island. This spring so much has been broadcasted about the various attempts to fly from the land you call Alaska that we felt practically sure we should be discovered. Three days ago we learned that a start had been made. Olaf the Hunter and his friends were very excited. They harnessed up their dogs and rushed down to the ice. They brought you back . . . 'Eppley,' you say your name is?" Bliss nodded. "You were very tired and dirty. Your face was burned dark by the sun and the wind. All the village had gathered to meet you. When they saw what Olaf had brought back they were much amused. They laughed loudly. They pointed out that all he had found was a wandering Skrelling. Eskimo, I think you call them. A tribe our forefathers held in great contempt. Olaf was very angry."

He broke off. Suddenly from one of the hanging cells issued a familiar crackling and buzzing. Followed some sort of announcement in hoarse unintelligible words. Then rose a crashing of drums and cymbals accompanied by a seething unmelodious roar of wind instruments.

Scotty's face became transfigured. His eyes widened and shone like stars. His hands clasped into vehement fists. He began to beat upon the stone flagging with his feet. Then, unable longer to control his emotions under the mesmeric effect of the blaring chorus hurtling from the little black receiver he threw his bald head back and burst:

" Ain't got no bananas to-day!"

Dead silence followed. The music abruptly ceased. McAlford looked sheepishly up. Both Norsemen averted their gaze. Bliss felt thoroughly mortified and at the same time piqued at the behavior of the colonists. To be sure, Scotty's outburst was hardly dignified. But, on the

other hand, there was nothing insulting or particularly dreadful about it.

Shaggy gigantic old Hroar broke the silence with a sigh that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul.

"There is the Devil in that music," he said slowly.

"But," protested Eppley, "it is not fair to judge us by a bit of song. We have art and religion and good government, and a thousand other things of which you know nothing."

Before Holgrimson could reply there echoed down the outside corridor the shuffling of many skin-clad feet. Boys and girls, young men and young women, began to straggle in. Chattering and laughing they filled the lower tiers of seats and waited. Some shouted inquiringly at Eric. He glanced at the older man, who nodded assent. Whereupon the former walked to the central sphere of glass and moved a controlling lever beneath it.

Once more music sprayed from one of the side receivers.

With an almost guilty start Bliss recognized the melody of another one of the latest syncopations that had swept his country with its merry measures. Scotty again was thrilled. Eric and the white-bearded patriarch stood aloof with bowed heads.

The audience, led by Olaf the Hunter who sat in the front row, fairly shrieked their appreciation of the galloping air. Many tried to sing the chorus. All laughed and chatted in an ecstasy of antiphonal delight. Youths rose and pranced as if inebriated. Blue-eyed maidens swayed languorously in their seats. Boys and girls giggled as though tickled in every rib at once.

The last note died away. Whereupon a vast sniffing and sighing pervaded the tear-stained, mirth-exhausted audience. Only the mighty Olaf seemed to have survived the ordeal with anything like his original vigor. He stood

INTO THE CAVERN

up. Briefly he spoke. His words were as strokes upon a gong. They resounded bell-like over the heads of the collection of youth before him.

"He reminds them," whispered Eric, "that they shall leave before the sun sets. This summer, that is."

"Leave?" asked Bliss, much puzzled. "For where?"

"For your land. That is the meaning of it all. They are determined to leave the peace and quiet of the settlement as soon as possible and travel south to your country."

"But what the devil do they want to do that for?" exclaimed Scotty. "They'll have a heck of a time! They haven't any money, nor any sense. They'll get lost in the subways, and run over on the streets. And if they escape those horrors they'll die of ptomaine poisoning at the first hot-dog stand they hit!"

"It is Olaf," continued Eric quietly. "His motive for going is to convert southern nations to universal peace and at the same time to enjoy the advantages of existence down there which seem so exciting as compared with our tranquil lives up here."

"Sort of bargain, I take it," suggested Bliss. "Olaf is going to give us universal peace in exchange for a little jazz!"

"Attaboy, Olaf!" cried Scotty. "Won't he be poking his head in the buzz saw though! Bliss, for the love of Mike, let's let him go ahead and do it! Nothing would make me happier than to see that stuck-up squarehead try to bum a ride off a Twenty-ninth Street taxi driver without having the price! Talk about babes in the woods!"

But before Bliss could reply a sudden piercing screech broke from the receiver. Eric sprang to his control and in a few seconds had clear articulate language coming through. Immediate silence fell. Eppley and McAlford nearly fainted at what they heard:

ZR WINS!

“ And reached Point Barrow to-day accompanied by his mechanic, Ramon Scammell. He reports that in his plane he located a new land in the unexplored area of the Polar Sea late on the afternoon of the third. This land was volcanic; one large crater was smoking at the time of his visit. . . .”

The voice trailed off. Eric worked feverishly to re-connect.

“ declares that he will return at once and explore the new continent which is of vast size and unlike any northern land. Not only is there possibility of gold, oil, and other precious minerals, but he believes it conceivable that the land may be inhabited. Besides his magnificent discovery, the surpassing geographical achievement of modern times, he has won the gratitude of the American people by succoring the crew of the ZR-5, whom he found on the pack ice in a crippled condition. He reports that he turned back immediately after visiting the new land because he wished to be sure a relief party was sent at once along the northern coast of Canada. He also found two officers from the dirigible wandering about on the ice, but they refused his offer of help. He will return at once to the polar continent and continue his exploration.”

The voice paused.

CHAPTER XXI

KRISTINA'S FEAR

“DON'T you see what that radio's bulletin overlooked?” asked Eppley gloomily when they were alone again in the little house that had been assigned to them.

“Can't say that I do,” growled Scotty through teeth set fiercely into a fat unlit cigar. “Looks to me as if your dear friend Welchor had the whole thing sewed up tighter than a drum.”

“That's just it. Not only has he been able to get the report through of his discovery of the new land, but he has put himself in exactly the position he so wished for: He is to all outward appearances a public benefactor, besides being a remarkably successful explorer. He has won everybody's confidence by pretending to help the ZR-5; and he has put us in a bad light by letting it be known that we refused his offer of help on the ice.”

“But can't the Skipper straighten all that as soon as he gets in touch with the outside world?”

“Scarcely. . . . Even if he does, the mischief will all have been accomplished by that time. You see, public opinion is a great deal like cement. It is soft and pliable up to a certain point. It can be molded and poured into almost any form one wishes. But let it once be allowed to set into some definite state of mind and it is harder than a rock. To redissolve and pour it again is almost beyond the power of man. Take the case of Peary's discovery of the North Pole. Scientific authorities now agree that Peary got there all right and that Dr. Cook

didn't. But the public will always be divided on the subject because in the beginning their opinion was to a large extent frozen into the belief that old Doc Cook was the winner. It is easier for people to stick to that idea than to change."

"You mean you are never going to get the credit for reaching this land first!" cried Scotty.

"If I do," assented his friend in a discouraged tone, "it will be almost a miracle."

"But it's *got* to belong to the United States!"

"That's just the point I was trying to explain to you. It can't belong to the United States unless we prove that we reached here first. Welchor has reported his discovery. He will now probably bring out some disinterested party from Alaska and show them the land to demonstrate that his report was absolutely true. Then he will turn his established claim over to his Oriental employers."

"Whom can he bring?"

"Makes no difference." Bliss suddenly paused. A terrible thought struck him. "You don't suppose the dog would think of dragging Joan Beckett out here, do you?" he wailed.

"Don't see why not. It's only a few hours' flight and her word would be as good as any. Also it would be a fine way for him to revenge himself on you."

For a few minutes both sat in scowling silence. Finally McAlford lit his badly damaged cigar. "Well, we can't do anything about that now. What I want to know, first of all, is how we are going to get out of this place. And, second, how we are ever going to prove that this land belongs to the United States."

Bliss rose and moved gloomily to the window. Through the little pane he was able to see beyond the green gardens of the village front. His glance swung out over the whitish haze of distant ice pack and seemed able to pene-

trate clear to the equally white building in Washington where his words had gone so unheeded the month before. He whirled upon his companion.

"If they had only listened to me, Scotty! The commercial and military value of this land is priceless. Heaven only knows what wealth is hidden in its interior! From what we have seen of it no money value could possibly be put upon its strategical and economic control of the transpolar air routes of the future. Even the acquisition of such a remarkable colony of people as this will mean a lot to the power which can claim them as dependents."

"You really think it's hopeless then?"

Eppley clenched his hands to fists and glared at the fat face looking so discouragingly up into his own.

"Hopeless, Scotty?" he said grimly. "Nothing is ever hopeless. I'm going to win this land for the United States if I die in the attempt. I have a just claim in her name and I am going to establish it. I shall wait here for a reasonable time. If the ZR-5 does not show up I am going to dig in until some American airship does show up. I'll organize this colony in defense of the land."

"But they won't fight. They're off war forever."

"I'll make 'em fight!"

"Suppose Welchor shows up."

"I'll throw him off. This land belongs to the United States now. I am the official representative present. And I do not consider that Thorne Welchor is a fit visitor to admit."

Scotty pondered for a moment. "Say," he said with a shade of sarcasm, "if you're the boss in charge, where do I come in?"

Bliss chuckled. "Oh, you'll be the Chief of Staff. How would that suit you?"

"Much rather be executioner," declared McAlford with

a grin, "and be assigned the job of chopping that guy Olaf's head off."

"Talking of chopping people's heads off," retorted the other savagely, "do you realize that American aviators have been able to fly out here for five years and not until this spring did any one take the trouble to make a success of the project?"

Came a gentle tap at the door. "Just me with your suppers," said Kristina's voice. She entered bearing a sort of box. Lifting off its cover she disclosed within a number of portions of various kinds of dainties stowed in the different compartments into which the box was divided. A double-walled arrangement retained the heat.

"You see we do no cooking in the houses," she explained. "We have a central sort of kitchen and take turns distributing meals to all the families in the village."

"What a corking idea!" exclaimed Bliss. "Then you don't have to worry about any sort of housework at home?"

"Never," smiled Kristina. "The houses are divided into groups, and for each group the women take turns shaking out the furs. About once every four moons one of us has such a spell. It is very easy, particularly because none of the cooking or sewing or other living tasks are done in the places we call our homes. They are real homes, not the workshops you seem to make of them in your country."

At a shout from without the smiling expression faded from her sweet face. Gravely she began laying out the dishes of food. The shout, which both men had recognized as the voice of Olaf the Hunter, was repeated. Fearfully Kristina glanced over her shoulder.

"I am so afraid!" she said suddenly in a low voice.

"Of that big bully?" asked Scotty promptly. "For if so we'll go out right now and fix him for you!"

KRISTINA'S FEAR

She raised one hand in quick protest. "Oh, no, it is not myself I am afraid for. It is Eric. You understand that even the best laboratory workers are compelled by the laws of the village to go out on a certain number of hunts lest the confined work harm their health."

Scotty nodded. "Your dad told us something like that," he admitted with a gruffness that covered his sympathy.

"Now it is Eric's turn to go. Olaf goes too. I am afraid he will carry out his threats that Eric shall never marry me."

"But I thought you people didn't kill each other up here?" protested Bliss with surprise.

"We don't. But sometimes when the men dislike one another they arrange it so that harm befalls the one whom they wish evil for."

"Ah-ha," muttered Scotty cynically. "So they beat the Devil around the stump after all!" He shook his head. "Bliss," he said aloud, "I'm afraid it'll take more than five centuries to reform the human beast. What do you think?"

Eppley ignored the question. "Kristina," he said, "don't you worry for a minute. My friend and I are going on that hunt. We want to have a look at your country anyway. We have a thing with us called a gun. It is the kind of thing we fight wars with at home. If Olaf the Hunter tries any funny business with your lad Eric we'll let him have a taste of what real war feels like."

"Maybe then he won't be so enthusiastic about going south to stop war," chuckled Scotty. "Eh, Bliss?"

Came a loud crash at the door. Before any had time to reply it was flung open and Olaf the Hunter filled its frame with his hulking body. To the girl he uttered several words in a harsh rasping voice, his loose lips

mouthed them disgustingly. Kristina shrank back. Then she said under her breath:

"He wants me to go. I am so afraid!"

Instantly Scotty strode forward. He was half a head shorter than the Viking. He underweighed him by fifty pounds, perhaps, despite his excess fat. But there was an angle in the tilt of his cigar that Bliss knew at once meant trouble.

"Say, you big hunk of cheese," he said in measured tones, "this lady is calling on us. Get out before we throw you out!"

Olaf did not move. His beady eyes protruded from their sockets as his anger mounted. The swollen blood vessels in his thick neck became great ridges under pressure of his emotion.

Scotty glared back unquailing at the ugly brute. Then a thought struck him. With a quick movement he reached down and seized the rifle from where he had laid it on the bench.

"You understand me," snapped Scotty. "So don't pretend you don't. This little walking stick is what we call a gun at home. A gun is a thing with an arm as long as from here to the beach and back. You go away down there and stand on the ice and this gun of mine will reach out of this window and punch a hole in your ribs without half trying. Look."

He stepped to the window and opened it. Resting the black barrel on the sill he pointed it towards the cliff.

"See that gull up there just to the left of the easternmost fall?"

Olaf nodded, his anger fading in his childish curiosity.

Scotty pulled the trigger. Before the smoke had cleared away or the echoes of the report had come clattering back from the great rock wall above him the bird's white body was dropping like a plummet from its perch.

KRISTINA'S FEAR

"And don't think I'm not watching you," continued Scotty, delighted at the effectiveness of his bluff. "Just you try to make trouble for this girl or for my friend Eric and I'll have my gun reach out and poke a hole in you the same way it did that bird."

For the first and last time Olaf the Hunter spoke. "But my size is not that of a gull," he announced proudly, drawing himself up full height and extending his massive chest towards McAlford.

For reply Scotty promptly shot a thick blue cloud of smoke through his puckered lips that caught the human mastodon full between the eyes. Choking and half blinded Olaf staggered back. A quick shove from the former's toe carried him on through the door which slammed forcibly after him.

"Now," proclaimed Scotty, as he took out his cleaning rod and set about oiling the repeater, "the universal peace of his happy country is about to come to an end! Eh, mate?"

The accuracy of McAlford's prophecy was confirmed, had he only known it, within the hour by the man whom he had so painstakingly insulted. For Olaf, watching his chance, sought Kristina alone in her home. This time he wasted no words on dubious threats.

"To-morrow the hunt, Kristina," he said.

"Oh-h!" she replied with a little cry. "You mean—?"

Olaf shrugged with brutal indifference. "Yes, your lover—sweet Eric goes with us."

Springing from her chair Kristina cast herself upon the blond giant. But her entreaty only roused his ire.

"Do you not know that your father's life as well lies in the hollow of my palm, silly girl?" For a moment the touch of her body against his seemed to soften the fiber of his intentions. Then swiftly his mood was steeled again. "Perhaps Eric shall return to-morrow. I cannot

ZR WINS!

say; for I do not yet foresee how foolish you will be. But I do say that if you make my planning difficult your father shall die as well."

"Take me—take me—" sobbed the girl. "I am nothing!"

"That I came to tell you, my little flutterer," smiled Olaf, half appeased. "To-morrow when the sun swings behind yonder cliff face meet me near the hitching ring. Together southward shall we go."

For a moment with uncontrollable fierceness he drew the half-fainting girl up to him; then released her, so that she crumpled to the sandstone flagging underfoot. Whereupon, after a glance of caution through the window, Olaf turned without a word and strode heavily out the door.

CHAPTER XXII

MAMMOTHS!

THE fashionable sportsman of the future is bound to seek in the Polar Sea a tonic for his jaded appetite for thrills. Nowhere else, save perhaps on the Antarctic plateau, is the unsetting sun so dazzling, the scenery so superb, the air so crisp, the environment in every way so stimulating.

And how astonishingly accessible will be our northern resorts! A national preserve in the new Arctic Continent will be but twenty-four hours from Chicago or New York. Breakfast to-day at home on fruit and eggs from the farm. To-morrow be seated by the Pole, hunger begat of the winelike air, and gorge on broiled venison fresh from the arctic prairies. . . .

"Maybe we're wasting time," muttered Bliss as he wormed his shoulders into his snug fitting, blue-fox shirt, a necessity in the tang of the snowy slopes just outside the volcano-heated village. "But who could resist it?"

Ten sledges in all made up the party. Five huge black and white dogs were harnessed fanwise to each, all romping about in uncontrollable joy to the despair of their drivers who would be forced presently to untangle the snarled-up traces.

A salvo like rifle fire split the air and they were off.

"Think of polo compared to this! Or even football!" sped Bliss's thoughts as he clung till his knuckles went white to the swaying sledge on which he crouched.

Over his head cracked his driver's whip. With giddy speed down the sloping trail galloped the teams. It was more than a race. A terrifying taste of speed even to the two visitors, used as they were to motor cars and planes. For herein lay tangible proof of speed unknown to the aviator who seems to hang in mid-air, or to the motorist plunging through a fence-rimmed groove of road. Here the snow-lined trail was miles wide. Powdery white dust spurted up. Dogs yelped. Whips popped. Men cried their urgings to the racers. None of the peril of a plane; nor the nerve-tearing strain of a motor. Yet all the delicious heart-stopping excitement of both.

Over the undulating plain the pace fell off a bit. In pure exuberance of spirits Bliss hopped off and ran. A loud breathing sounded in his ear. McAlford lumbered up and fell sprawling onto the load.

"Say—" he panted, "where are the guns or harpoons? I thought this was a hunting expedition. All they have is a lot of line. Are they going to lasso bears?"

"I brought the gun," began Bliss.

Eric trotted up. "We use the cells," he broke in. "Not believing in fighting of any sort we make no kind of weapons except our knives." He indicated the sledge ahead piled with what Bliss had thought was food. "That load has in it fifty cells all charged."

"Why, you're a regular bunch of bomb throwers!" exclaimed Scotty. "May I ask how many people you usually electrocute on one of these expeditions?"

"None," laughed Eric. "We never have the slightest trouble with electric shocks any more. Do you in your country?"

"*Do we!*" McAlford bared one arm to show an ugly scar. "That's where I once got too familiar with a generator switchboard. How in thunderation do you avoid such trouble?"

"Very simply. I don't suppose you noticed the soap you used. It has in it a solution of what you call 'platinum' which is deposited in a thin film on the body. Any electric current coming in contact with this film finds it such an excellent conductor that it moves rapidly down it to the ground where it escapes."

"Heaven be praised, I took a bath this morning!" breathed Scotty fervently.

But Bliss, being less of an engineer, dwelt upon the mention of the metal. "You mean you have sufficient platinum up here to put it in your soap?" he asked incredulously.

Eric pointed with his whipstock towards one of the mountains looming like a huge white-frosted cake ahead. "Masses of it there. Enough to last the whole world forever, I should judge."

"Do you hear that, McAlford?" said Bliss excitedly. "That's the kind of thing to expect of this land. All the gold in Alaska can't compare with the value of a platinum mine such as this one Eric describes! Think what those villains Welchor and Scammell are trying to steal from us! All the burglaries since Adam put together wouldn't be a drop in the bucket compared to what the United States will lose if we fail to establish our claim!"

A shout rang out from the head of the column. The caravan swerved right. The lowest portion of the immense plateau had been reached. Fluffy tops of last year's grass stuck up through the snow. Here and there across the tremendous glittering expanse were visible what looked like small groups of white or black ants. Around each group moved a darker ant.

"Our herds of caribou and musk oxen," explained Eric. "They graze back and forth over these pastures under the care of dogs especially trained for the duty. They multiply so rapidly that there is scarcely pasturage

enough to hold them. I don't see why you have not used arctic cattle long before this."

"But I thought we were going hunting," put in McAlford disappointedly.

"We are," replied the other. "Killing these tame creatures is not sport from our point of view. We always take back enough to keep us in food and skins for the summer. Our real task is to gather meat for the dark months. That is the purpose of this expedition. The animals we are after are called 'urks.' I don't know whether you have them south or not. 'Talimangeepe-turks' is the full name. But just 'urks' is so much simpler."

"Sounds like a hiccough to me," observed Scotty.

"What are they like?" asked Eppley.

But before the Norseman could reply a sudden swift acceleration swept down the column. The drivers abruptly speeded up their teams. Eric sprang back to his sledge. Bliss had just time to tumble headlong beside his driver who knelt and swung his long black rawhide whip with vicious strokes at the galloping dogs.

The trail led sharply right towards a shelflike rise which stood clear above the main level of the plateau. By a détour to leeward the speeding teams were brought to the far edge of it and halted.

"Now go and see what an urk looks like," suggested Eric. "But be careful," he cautioned. "They're a pretty rough crowd if aroused."

Whereupon the two explorers dismounted and crept towards the shelf of land upon which the objects of the hunt were gathered.

At first sight both lay speechless with astonishment in the snow. Not fifty yards away grazed a herd of twenty animals, the like of which neither had ever seen before.

"*Elephants!*" gasped McAlford.

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But who ever saw elephants of such colossal size, with shaggy hair covering their massive brown bodies and enormously long tusks of gleaming ivory curving almost back upon their broad flat foreheads?

"No," said Eppley in a strained voice, "those must be *mammoths*—prehistoric mammoths which the world believes extinct!"

That Eppley and McAlford were justly thrilled will be conceded by any one familiar with the details of what we know already of this magnificent animal which once roamed all of northern Europe, and Siberia in Asia.

"Thank goodness we've had the lesson of the buffalo!"

"What have buffalo got to do with this menagerie?" asked McAlford, not taking his fascinated eyes off the herd. "I'd say what a shame it is Mister Barnum isn't here to pick that old bull for his circus."

"The buffalo of North America," went on Bliss, "existed by the tens of thousands before they were slaughtered in the early years of the last century. They were fine meat-and-wool-bearing animals. Now they are practically extinct. These mammoths can be fostered. Eric tells me that delicious meat we thought was venison was really mammoth meat. Think of it! On every one of these big fellows there's as much roast beef as eight or ten large steers could show. And that old cow over there would give thirty gallons of milk a day if she gave a quart!"

Eric trotted up. "We are ready," he announced laconically. His face was somewhat pale, Bliss thought. "Olaf has made me Man of the Knife."

"How is that?"

"Man of the Knife," repeated the pale Norse youth. "It is my task to dispatch the animals that are killed."

"Some skulduggery, I bet," put in McAlford. "That is, if Olaf decided it."

Which soon enough proved the truth.

Leaving the teams in charge of one of the younger drivers well to leeward so that the mammoths could neither see nor smell them the hunters walked back over the trail in a wide semicircle.

"I'm taking the gun," muttered Scotty. "I'm not up on elephant hunting with bombs and I don't feel quite as comfortable at the prospect as I might."

Each of the hunters carried four cells. They arranged themselves in a long line just below the slight rise marking the shelf on which the mammoths grazed. Having got in position they knelt and waited.

Eric, who carried no cells, or "bombs" as Scotty called them, then stepped forward. On his hands and knees he crawled almost to the crest of the rise. Bliss could see that his hands were trembling with excitement. Just before reaching a point from which the animals might discover him he lay down and unsheathed his long hunting knife.

"Don't look good to me," growled Scotty, more alarmed than ever.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than Olaf standing near the center of the line raised his hand. At his signal the hunters cautiously advanced, bending low that the unsuspecting monsters ahead might not see them.

Slowly up the rise they went. It was a strange sight. The fur-clad men waddling through the deep snow, each clutching the black cells to his breast; Eric crouched beyond them, his knife blade glistening like a slender diamond in the sunshine; the shaggy mammoths snortingly browsing in all their terrifying monstrous size and strength a few rods above him over the top; and the whole astonishing picture backed by the range of snow-capped mountains rising in a towering barrier against the sapphire sky beyond.

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In line with Eric the hunters paused again. Once more Olaf raised his hand. Down dropped the hand. Instantly, with wild yells, the men sprang forward. Over the crest they leaped. Swiftly, almost before the dumfounded mammoths had time to see them, they spread their cells in a long row. Another chorus of bloodcurdling shouts and all spun about and fled for safety.

But the shouts of the men were as the hum of so many bees compared with the awful roar that went up from the herd. Such thundering bellows as issued from the great gaping throats seemed beyond the power of living animal to make. Led by the enormous bull they charged, tossing their long milky tusks and thudding with earth-shaking strides towards the retreating hunters. Eric kneeling just below the crest looked like a pigmy beside the four-legged mountains bearing down upon him.

The first mammoth to reach the line of cells was a young stripling as compared with the rest. A flash of reddish flame shot up and the gigantic animal with one last dreadful scream of pain and terror rolled headlong over the brink.

"I see!" cried McAlford, jumping up and down in his excitement. "They're being electrocuted!"

Which was almost true. For as each mammoth crossed the line of cells the flash of flame, the piercing scream, the sprawling monster, were repeated. But not complete electrocution, as both men almost immediately realized. Apparently the oily hides of the mammoths insulated them against the full force of the electrical discharge. And as each thudded to the ground it lay jerking and groaning while Eric, "Man of the Knife," leaped bravely upon the shuddering mountain of flesh and plunged his gleaming blade into its heart.

It was clear now that the extreme ferocity of the behemoths made it necessary for the hunters to proceed

with such caution. Also the savage swiftness of the charge well justified the Norsemen's scheme to drop their cells in one close line and dash for shelter. None would have had time to draw his knife as the arms of all were far too full of bombs to carry any weapon in addition.

Thus it was necessary to station one man, as Eric had been stationed, to dispatch the semiconscious brutes before they could regain their strength.

Already he had slain all but two. His blade dripped. From where Bliss stood he could see the man was bathed in gore.

The old bull and one fat cow remained. Apparently age and weight had cut their speed. With incredible agility Eric finished his task before these last two monsters reached the line. The same flash of flame. But—

"Did you see that!" gasped Bliss.

The towering bull mammoth bellowing wildly stumbled to his knees.

McAlford nodded. His heart was in his mouth. "Why, *it wasn't a full charge!*" he cried.

With sickening dread for the almost unarmed Eric, each realized Olaf's treachery. For just then the cow also reached the cells, which Olaf had spread. They were the ones nearest where Eric had lain. The cow was scarcely stopped. She stumbled, trumpeted in fury, and turned to the nearest human upon which to vent her wrath. She found that human—Eric—stained crimson with the blood of her herd already standing knife poised in air face to face with the tossing twelve-foot tusks of the monstrous bull.

Such a simple trick it was: Olaf the Hunter with his prestige had been able to detail Eric at the most dangerous point. Olaf had further arranged that his own cells should not only each be charged too weakly to bring down a mammoth, but that they should be laid where Eric, the

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man he hated, was most likely to stand. And now his trick had met with unbelievable success. For with the hunters far out of danger, Eppley and McAlford near by gripping only their small-caliber rifle, Eric faced not one, but two, of the infuriated and quite unwounded mammoths.

Roosevelt in one of his accounts of hunting in Northern Africa describes the plight of a gun bearer cornered by a wounded elephant gone mad with rage and pain.

The wretched man, he says in part, was dazed with fear. His muscles failed him. Paralyzed by the spectacle of the onrushing monster, he stood rooted to the spot. One hand went out in a pitiful gesture of protest. The other trembled against his livid face.

The fellow's tribesmen paused in their headlong flight. A morbid fascination at the fearful sight gripped them. They stopped to watch the murder of a helpless man. Some had guns, but stupidly failed to use them.

The flash of swinging tusks, a final trampling thud, a roar of triumph, and all was over. . . .

But Eric was no gun bearer of the south. He was a Viking with the Viking's traditions of courage.

By a swift sidestep he avoided the bull. Springing forward he plunged his knife to its hilt into the cow. The cow fell. With a frantic jerk he tried to disengage the knife. But the bull was upon him. The cow toppled into the snow taking his only weapon with her.

Olaf the Hunter must have smiled to himself. Yet he could not have been wholly assured. For the next second after Eppley realized what had happened he snatched the rifle from McAlford's hands and broke into a run. He knew no ordinary shot could drop the mammoth bull. He knew even better the microscopic chance he had of hitting the huge animal in a vital spot. So he did the only thing that could give him any promise of

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succoring his friend. He ran at top speed toward the scene of action. He arrived almost exactly at the moment that the cow rolled over with the hilt of Eric's knife sticking out of her ribs. Neither man nor mammoth seemed to notice him. The bull lowered his enormous head for a final charge. His gleaming tusks dipped the snow. For the fraction of a second he stood thus poised. But that fraction was all Bliss Eppley needed. Aim incredibly swift, the touch of his finger on the trigger, and the rifle muzzle spit flame for a foot towards the bull. Twice more its shots rang out before the inevitable occurred. Then without so much as a gasp the great creature sank upon its knees, trembled spasmodically for a moment, and rolled over into the crimsoned snow, stone dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

LAKE MYSTERY

WHILE the scowling Olaf and his friends set about butchering the dead mammoths Eric attended to his slimy clothing. He was smeared from head to foot with blood. Even his face presented a spectacle of gory horror. Fortunately the skin garments which he wore were impervious to the mess or he would have had to disrobe in the cold air and put on his spare outfit.

At his direction both Eppley and McAlford gathered tufts of grass from under the snow and helped him in the swabbing-off process. The latter, grunting on his hands and knees, suddenly gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

"Look here, Eric," he cried, "do mammoths have lubricating oil in their blood?"

"Have what?"

"Oil—heavy black oil? I can readily perceive why such walloping big creatures as they are should need lubrication. But somehow it doesn't seem natural for—"

"Oh, that—" laughed Eric, glancing down at the black smear which ran the full length of one of his boots. "That didn't come from the urks. I must have knelt in it while I was waiting for them to charge. You can find that sort of stuff all around here. We use it in the laboratories."

He began kicking into the snow. Presently he called the two to come and look. There, revealed by the white crusts which he had put aside, was a small pool of dark viscous liquid. Scotty instantly dropped to his knees and

stuck his nose almost into it. After a single sniff he plunged his fingers into the mess and held them up dripping for Bliss to see.

"*Oil!*" he cried. "Real live oil! Seepage at the surface!"

"That means a lot underneath, doesn't it?" said Bliss excitedly. "I wonder if this isn't the same heavy gravity flow they've recently located in Alaska?"

"Most likely. Gosh, we've struck it rich all right! This means more than ever that our land is tremendously valuable. If we are fools enough to let that crook Welchor get away with his claim we ought to be shot!"

"Look here," broke in Eric, "if you two are interested in oil there is more of it the other side of the ridge."

"*Interested!*" shouted McAlford. "Man, the world we live in runs on oil these days!"

Eric chuckled. "You live in a funny world all right. I suppose you haven't found out how to use the heat of the center of the earth the way we do or you wouldn't bother with this crude stuff."

"But we distill it. We heat it until the lighter oils like kerosene and gasoline come off in vapor which, when condensed, make excellent fuel."

The Norseman shrugged. "We did that long ago. But it's such a waste of time when there are so many easier ways of securing power. Our cells, for instance—"

Scotty patted the speaker on his slimy back. "That's all right, old scout. Probably we'll come to cells ourselves before many years. But by that time my friend and I will be in our graves. What we are interested in now is the present. And at present fuel-oil preserves are the most valuable assets a nation may have. If what you say is true, that there is more of this stuff nearby, lead us to it!"

With something of a pitying air at their relative bar-

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barism in being so interested in the worthless oil Eric led the way. Across the broad pasture where the mammoths had been feeding the going was fairly good as the huge animals had stamped down the heavy snow. But when the three started up the slope beyond progress became a floundering struggle in the deep drifts.

This slope culminated in a long ridge that wound in an irregular line north and south as far as the eye could reach. At scattered spots where the wind had swept the surface clean of snow were revealed characteristic rolls or billows of hardened lava.

Glancing at the Himalayan-like chain of magnificent mountain peaks peeping up over the crest of the ridge there came to Eppley a rough idea of what might have occurred in earlier geological times to build such a formation.

As was obvious from their shapes the mountains ahead were volcanic, all extinct craters. Hroar had explained that they encircled the original polar paradise which the Norsemen escaping from Greenland had inhabited prior to the terrible eruption of 1783. The lava flow from them must have been enormous. And, reconstructing from the old Viking's story, the molten rock must have been forced out several miles from the base of the volcanoes.

In other words, as Bliss deduced it, this winding lava ridge they were climbing must be a sort of dike running roughly parallel to the mountain chain itself.

The higher he scrambled the more convinced he became of the correctness of his reasoning.

"Then there must be a lake in here!" he exclaimed.

"Why?" asked Scotty. "And where is the water to come from?"

"From those peaks, of course." He turned to Eric. "Isn't there a lake behind this barrier?" he inquired.

Eric looked slightly surprised. "Yes," he said. "How did you know?"

"Because from these rock formations I should judge that there ought to be a sort of moat running around the base of yonder mountains. And naturally such a moat would be filled with water because of the—"

The words died on his lips. For at that moment he reached the crest and could see beyond.

Just as he had guessed there stretched between him and the white slopes a mile or so to the eastward a blue and glassy surface without a ripple on the mirror it presented. Northwards and southwards the lovely lake spread and curved in one unbroken sheet around the circling mountain range it bordered. So deep was the azure blue reflected from it that Bliss glanced involuntarily to the blue sky overhead to see if such exquisite color were possible in the heavens.

From where the two explorers stood the lake shore was but fifty or sixty feet below them. The slope was steep; the lava at that point smooth and seemingly polished. But there were a number of inviting-looking footholds that seemed to beckon them onward.

Close to the shore the blue reflection faded out and the lake's flat surface darkened in token, so both men thought, of water of such clarity that the black bottom was as visible as if no substance lay between it and the observer's eye.

"Do you suppose there are fish?" suggested Bliss.

McAlford grunted something unintelligible. The last thing in the world he had expected was to find himself face to face with a winding Alpine lake in the midst of this wilderness of ice and snow.

"But the darned thing isn't frozen!" he suddenly ejaculated in a strained voice. "There's something queer about that lake. What do you think?"

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"By gosh! That's right! Every lake up here at this time of the year ought still to be frozen. How about its being salt water? That doesn't freeze at so high a temperature as fresh water."

"But there would be small cakes of ice floating around in it left over from last winter. Remember the inlet at Point Barrow?"

"Another thing," added Bliss, more puzzled than ever, "do you realize that there is a nice little north breeze blowing, yet there's not a single ripple?"

"It couldn't be molten lava or anything like that," replied the equally nonplused McAlford, "or there would be a deal of condensation in this cold air."

Both turned to their friend Eric for some explanation of the strange phenomenon. But he had wandered away apparently to examine some mammoth tracks in the sparse grass patches that grew further along the crest of the ridge.

"I'm going down there and find out what it is!" announced Bliss. "I can't stand the strain on my curiosity any longer."

"Same here!" agreed McAlford and clambered quickly after him.

The descent proved more difficult than promised from the top. The lava face was very smooth and the angle at which it rested too steep for solid foothold. Only by stepping from one small ledge to the next were the two able to work their way slowly down.

"Hey!" cried Bliss about halfway from the bottom. "Here's another oil seepage!"

For answer he heard McAlford emit a smothered grunt. The next instant the big man slid past him sitting down.

"Guess I struck one too!" laughed Scotty from where he came to anchor several feet below. Then, "Gosh Al-

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mighty, *damn!*" he blurted. "Here's another!" Whereupon he skated down another fifteen feet to within a short yard of the surface of the lake.

In the course of chuckling at his friend's misfortune Bliss felt himself begin to slip.

Came a loud cry from the top of the ridge:

"No! *No!* *NO!*"

It was Eric. A stream of unintelligible protests came floating down to the two men sitting in silly helplessness on the shore.

But the warning came too late. In an astonished voice Eppley, gazing fixedly at the black surface just beneath him, gasped: "*Scotty, the whole blooming lake is oil!*"

McAlford nodded. "Not only is it oil," he said in hollow tones, "but we're sitting in the streams of oil that feed it. This whole bank behind us is honeycombed with seepages. Look over your shoulder. Oil is oozing from every pore of the rock!"

"And," added Bliss in dismay, "we have about as much chance to climb back up as a couple of frogs in a soapy bathtub! It's up to Eric to haul us out!"

He turned to call. . . . But the Norseman had disappeared!

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE BRINK

HARDSHIP and danger were no new diet for Bliss Eppley. In the earlier days of aviation he had been among the first to become a pilot. He had flown a Curtiss seaplane with nothing but a tiny plank between him and the hard-boiled coastline far below. Twice had pilots with him been killed while he had miraculously escaped. Once he had fallen a sheer two thousand feet in a plunging wreck of wings and struts. Only his grim hold had saved him at the end. The débris from which he was hauled testified to the horrible death that he had missed by a fraction of an inch.

His present grim predicament, which contained no vivid tonic of plunging flight, was sodden grief by contrast.

Then there was his trick in submarines. Long days of anguish in a suffocating atmosphere, the sea's surface a mad riot of wind and waves. Once for fifty-two hours he and a crew of twenty had lain on the bottom, fathoms down in a submersible, unable to rise. Death stared them in the face. One man's heart failed in the torment of anxiety. Another's mind broke and loosed a raving maniac in their midst.

Yet submarines meant action: never dull desperation such as Bliss knew now, perched as he was in silly helplessness above the lake of oil.

During the Great War he had done duty aboard a vicious old destroyer that never failed to fill her trick in the Bay of Biscay, even while ocean liners through the

convoys lost boats and bridge rails in the terrific storms that swept down from the black north waters.

In destroyers there was always the enemy: but now no enemy save Death. Whimsical memory made Bliss grin.

"Don't see what there is in this to laugh about," growled McAlford, clinging with "toes-and-teeth" to the slippery rock beneath him. At every breath he seemed to lose a bit and his huge carcass drift imperceptibly towards the slimy lake.

Every soldier of fortune will agree that three situations equally perilous will affect a man's morale in three utterly different ways. Take the heroic soldier going over the top or the armed hunter facing a charging lion. The mind of each is wholly occupied with the part he is about to play. The soldier slips his burdensome pack so that he may run; glances swiftly about for possible cover; picks with incredible rapidity his footsteps among the mud and débris. Likewise the hunter braced against the maddened beast grips his rifle stock, takes brief aim, and shoots for his very life.

For Eppley and McAlford balanced there in awful silence the roar of lion or battle would have braced them for the test.

Then there is the man alone in the awful dark of midnight, crouching in terror in the corner of the musty attic of a haunted house. From far across the field comes the dismal hoot of an owl. A low bloodcurdling moan. A creak on the ancient stairs. . . . Stertorous breathing. . . . The huddled watcher is consumed by fear. He feels as if he must scream aloud. The clammy touch of a hand against his cheek and he would become upon the instant a raving maniac! . . . All the danger of the unknown.

But dreadful ness like that engulfs the reason. No mental space is left for grieving on what might have been. The victim cannot look upon the sunshine, the blue sky,

the gorgeousness of all outdoors, and shrink from leaving it—the way the two explorers did.

And finally there is the third kind of danger, the kind that now faced Eppley and his friend. Danger with no leaven of excitement. Danger that becomes fully obvious only with creeping slowness. Danger under circumstances that otherwise might be beautiful, and so the more terrible by contrast.

"Scotty," said Bliss through set teeth, "a man without imagination wouldn't half mind this mess we're in. He wouldn't realize that oil with its low specific gravity will scarcely float the human body. Nor would he know how cold this danged lake is."

Which was cruelly true. For the freezing point of oil, while variable, always lies many degrees below Fahrenheit. Fresh water congeals at about 30° F. Brine, of the ocean's strength, does not on the other hand solidify until temperature of the air falls past ten above.

"I'm slipping!" gasped Scotty as he pawed wildly at the glassy surface.

"Look!" snapped Bliss, and slammed his bare palms flat against a level space above him. "Take off your mittens. Force your hands down hard. You thus may exclude all air and the atmospheric pressure of fourteen pounds per square inch helps hold them there."

Both were silent for a bit. Both breathed hard with the exertion of keeping from sliding into the dreadful slime beneath them. And all the while the oozing oil flowed under them in a quiet stream of black venom to its vast reservoir, the lake.

"Keep talking," gritted Bliss through taut jaws. "Talk makes it easier. . . . Where do you suppose this oil could be coming from?"

"Why doesn't Eric bring a rope?" moaned Scotty.

The other paid no heed. "Gas pressure behind oil

usually causes seepage," he observed as calmly as if they had been loafing on the club veranda at home. "Or seepage may be brought about in the same way water springs are, by pressure of a quantity held at some higher level from which it leaks through crevices towards the spring."

To which McAlford grunted. "In either case the flow goes on. If Eric doesn't come we're goners. I can't hold on much longer."

A shout from the ridge above made both look up. To their infinite relief it was Eric. He bore a large coil of line over one shoulder. He stooped to make it fast. Fortunately several rocky projections directly over the two provided an excellent anchorage.

"Here it comes!" he shouted.

Slowly the wriggling strand slid down. Several times it caught and had to be drawn up or jerked loose. As it neared the two Bliss spoke quickly.

"You catch it, old man. You are having the hardest time to hold on because of your weight."

"Which is just the reason," retorted McAlford, "that you ought to go up first. If my hulk carries this line away we're both lost. No sense in that. You go now and send it back for me."

But, as it turned out, the dilemma required no settlement by the two men most concerned. For at that moment the sound of an angry voice drew their attention once more upwards. Harsh guttural words drifted down.

They saw at once it was Olaf. He loomed against the blue sky like some prehistoric giant. His large block-shaped head was cocked to one side. His thick legs were braced wide apart in his characteristic stance. Slender Eric looked a sapling beside the other's oaklike trunk.

"God help us!" burst McAlford. "*He's got the rifle!*"

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than the giant Viking raised the firearm to his shoulder.

"You told me to go down to the beach," he bellowed, "and your Devil tube with its long arm would punch a hole in my ribs! Now I try him with you!"

"Tell him for heaven's sake not to pull the trigger!" gulped Scotty. "I'm afraid to yell. If I open my mouth any wider I'll slip!"

But before either of the horrified victims could shout a protest the Norse barbarian raised the rifle to his shoulder, as he had seen the American do, and took careful aim. A flash of frightened wonder seared Eppley's mind: which of them was Olaf aiming at? Which of the two would die?

A puff of yellow gas centered with bright red flame, a loud report, and the steel-jacketed bullet sang viciously over their heads and *punged* into the oil lake behind them.

Eric had saved them. For at the very instant Olaf pulled the trigger the youth had sprung forward and with a blow of his forearm had knocked the barrel into the air. His debt to Bliss was paid.

Instantly burst from the giant a stream of raucous language in his native tongue. The pair clinging so desperately to the oil-drenched rocks below saw to their dismay the flash of a knife in the sun. The next moment the line that was to have saved them slithered down into the lake. They saw Olaf turn on Eric, seize him by the throat, and drag him out of sight.

No sounds of the struggle came down. No outcries. No blows. But after what seemed an endless time came faintly from the distance the crack of whips, yelps of dogs, and voices used jerkily as if to shout orders.

"They're driving off," said Bliss.

With lips blue from cold and teeth chattering more from nervous strain than chill, Scotty stared upward at the empty skyline. "But surely they wouldn't go off and leave us here!" he almost sobbed.

"They would if Olaf knocked out Eric and then went and told a lie to the hunters," snapped his friend.

McAlford groaned. With an effort Bliss smothered a similar sound. They were men to whom danger at last had come without excitement, without disguise. They were facing a terrible fate. Their fate was in plain sight. Death was but a question of minutes. Both had slipped within a foot of the lake of oil. Both had exhausted their strength not only in striving to clamber upwards, but to hold their own against the insidious film of greasy slime that continued to flow under their hands and knees and toes. And they were still slipping. Danger obvious and inescapable. Peril in the worst form peril can take. . . . While overhead the sky was deeply, gloriously blue, the snowy peaks reflected in the mirror of the lake's clear surface. A spectacle of beauty so superb that one would gasp to behold it. . . . One in different circumstances, that is.

Bliss looked up. His face was ashen. "Scotty, old man," he whispered, "it certainly looks as if it were all off with our party."

McAlford, not trusting himself to speak, nodded assent.

"Scotty," went on Eppley, "I see in the oil there a lot of little bubbles coming up from the bottom. They mean gas. There must be gas close to the surface. If—when we go in—" his words came slowly in the effort to hold on—"it still looks like a game of drowning or freezing I suggest you inhale the gas. That would be a more peaceful way to end things than by cold or by the suffocation of drowning. Do you understand?"

Again Scotty nodded.

Then silence, each resolved to hold on to the very last, as is the instinct of preservation, in a thin hope something might turn up.

CHAPTER XXV

INTO THE FIRE

PROBABLY if all the adventurers in history could be assembled and asked what has impressed them most about being in a tight place their composite reply would be: "The amazingly long time a man can hang on to life after he has given himself up for lost."

At least an hour later the two human leeches on the slippery lava bank above the lake of oil, into which they expected any moment to slide to their death, were still hanging on just as desperately—and just as successfully.

But the expression on their strained faces was dreadful to behold. Both were numb with cold, both exhausted by physical and nervous stress of their frightful position. Neither spoke. Their eyes were closed. Their skin was the color of slate.

The sun mounting higher and swinging on its course finally crept over the ridge above and shed its grateful warmth upon them.

No sign of Eric. No escape had their brains been able to contrive to free them from their terrible predicament.

Feeling the sun's rays Bliss opened his eyes. Quickly he shut them again. He blinked, but not from the strong light.

"Scotty!" he cried. "*The oil is stopping!*"

It was. Where there had been a steady stream of greasy seepage under their bodies, there was now but a series of threadlike trickles. Even while they watched these trickles diminished; many ceased altogether. The sun's heat fell upon the bare rock. The oil would not

evaporate so swiftly as water. Yet in the space of minutes it became perceptibly thicker. A gummy residue lay where lately had flowed a steady lubricant impossible for the two to cross.

"By gorry!" ejaculated McAlford. "We're going to get out of this mess after all! Who would ever have thought it!" He paused for a moment. Then with a smile of satisfaction lighting up his broad face he added: "Just wait till I see that rascal Olaf again!"

Steadily the sun rose. Soon both men found they could sit up and take off their oil-soaked shirts and wring them out. Hanging in their precarious position became less difficult. Presently it was possible to pick finger holds above their heads.

Inch by inch the upward climb began. Every foot of the way had to be swabbed with their shirts and the shirts wrung out before another step were taken. But once past the line of main seepages the rest of the ascent became easy.

McAlford paused panting. "Gosh—let's rest a moment," he gasped. "Say, Bliss, how would you account for the miracle that saved our lives? I was on the Navy Oil Commission a few years ago and I'm hanged if I ever heard of any such phenomenon as intermittent seepage! Did you?"

Eppley smiled. "I've been puzzling over it while we climbed. I believe I have hit the solution. Did you notice that the stoppage came after the sun passed the axis of the island—the lake too?"

"Yes, but—"

"No 'buts' at all. I believe that this lake of oil is so enormous that there is a regular tide in it. You know tides rise and fall in our big lakes of the United States. Few people realize the fact. But they do."

"Yes," agreed the other ruminatively, "I know there

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is a tide in everything. Even the inelastic surface of the solid earth is lifted up a microscopic degree as the sun passes over it. A seismograph can register the movement. But I don't see how even a tide would account for the seepage."

"It means," went on Eppley, a note of excitement in his voice, "that there must be even a larger reservoir of oil besides this we almost fell into; and that when its level is disturbed by passage of the sun or moon it drains over into its neighbor.

"The important thing, though, is not the why or how of this lake. But the *what* it is going to mean to the nation who can claim it for her own. One of the great problems of transpolar flying will always be the question of fuel. Neither Europe nor Asia have any oil fields near the take-offs for the arctic route. And the limited oil in Canada and Alaska is pretty far off the main line. Therefore to have an enormous supply like this almost exactly on the route, and just about halfway across is like an act of Providence. Refineries could be built right here on the shore where we are. That plain out there would make an ideal location for a city with plenty of room for landing fields. The taxes alone would support our Navy from now until doomsday!"

But McAlford, to his friend's surprise did not show any signs of enthusiasm. After a bit he said:

"That's all very fine, Bliss. You talk exactly the way the writers in our Sunday magazines do. Everything fine and dandy except you leave out the most important point."

"What's that?"

"Simply that if this enormous lake of oil once caught fire your lovely dream would be at an end. Don't you know that they have the most awful time these days putting out fires in relatively small storage tanks that

sometimes light up out in California? Even with patent extinguishers and all sorts of contraptions it is practically impossible to stop them once they get good and started. Now there must be billions and billions of barrels of oil in this lake. It makes me sick to think of what would happen if it once caught fire!"

Bliss listened without comment. Then shaking his head sadly he observed: "You are a kill-joy, Scotty, if ever one lived!"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

For reply the other scrambled to his feet. "Look here, man, we've got something else to think about now besides burning up this oil tank. How do you know poor Eric isn't up there bleeding to death?"

Their first sight on reaching the top lent substance to Bliss's words. The snow was trampled down for a space of several yards about where the Norsemen had struggled. In a depression at one side was a pool of blood.

"He's killed him!" barked McAlford. "And I'm going to—"

"Now don't get excited," interrupted Bliss. "There isn't anybody here for one thing. And I don't believe that Olaf would dare murder Eric anyway. More than likely he lost his temper and only wounded him; then took him up to the village for repairs."

McAlford stooped with an exclamation of delight. "Well, he was excited enough to leave the rifle anyway!" he cried, and lifted the repeater from the snow. He examined it. "He didn't shoot him, either, for there is only one cartridge missing!"

Further search revealed no additional evidence that might throw light on the fate of their friend. Both agreed that nothing was to be gained by delaying.

"No telling what our reception will be by the time we reach the village," groaned McAlford, his nerves par-

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ticularly ragged from having discovered his last remaining cigar soaked with oil.

A very silent march they made across the plain. The snow was sufficient impediment alone. But with their jaded spirits and the blanket of their anxiety for what trouble Olaf might have made on his return, to say nothing of the discomfort of having to walk with clothing soaked in crude petroleum, it was a bedraggled pair of explorers that trudged back toward the volcano.

Late afternoon had come before they reached the place where the trail took the first rise up the northern slope of the mountain. Pure physical exhaustion made frequent halts imperative. Now they flung themselves down in the snow regardless of the cold, and waited pantingly for a little returning strength to help them make the steeper grade beyond.

It had become a habit with both by now to study the sky every other minute or so. For neither one was absolutely convinced that the ZR-5 was out of the race.

"Do you know, Scotty, I wouldn't be surprised to see her turn up any moment!" exclaimed Bliss for the millionth time.

"I'd be far less surprised to see Welchor. He ought to be back this afternoon. I've been expecting him ever since last night. He's had time now to finish up at Point Barrow and ought to be here any moment."

Eppley shaded his eyes with his hand. "Scotty, take a look down there on the ice. My eyes are sort of woozy after the day we've had. I swear it looks to me as if I saw a plane parked just beyond the tide crack."

"But he wouldn't leave his machine on the ice, would he?"

"He certainly would. This land is pretty rocky for one thing; and, for another, the snow on it makes it im-

possible to pick a smooth place. The sea ice is always the best place for a plane up here."

But McAlford's eyes were no better than his friend's. So the upshot of their doubt was to drag their weary bodies a mile closer to the shore and take a decisive look. The sight that met their eyes fully rewarded their effort.

There perched on the ice as big as life stood the plane that had pursued them so short a while before, the plane flown by Welchor and Scammell. No one seemed to be in it or about it. A mooring line visible indicated that it had been purposely parked for some time.

"Means we'd better think twice before we go back to the village," muttered McAlford.

But Eppley did not reply. He was pondering gloomily the dreadful possibilities of whom the oily scoundrels might have brought with them to witness the truth of their claim to the land.

Together they searched the plane for any clues to Welchor's plan or to his passengers. Very little was found; nothing, in fact, that pointed to anything definite they wished to know. A large thermos bottle nearly full of hot coffee put a bit of silver lining into their cloud of unhappiness. And when McAlford hauled out a bag of clothes from the cockpit containing two dry caribou-skin shirts into which they promptly changed, life somehow looked a little rosier.

"I don't hesitate to take these things," remarked Bliss a little apologetically, "because it is war from now on. War to the knife. Welchor abandoned me to die, and told me so to my face. He has been a treacherous crook in a dozen different ways. He wouldn't hesitate to murder either of us if it suited his purposes."

"Oh-ho!" shouted McAlford, holding aloft a box of cigars. "Now I'm good for a half dozen more rounds! Bring on the dogs!"

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"All right," laughed Bliss, "start the old brain working. What should our next move be, according to your way of thinking?"

"Destroy his plane!" suggested McAlford with prompt vigor, as he ripped open the cigars. "Force him and Scammell to stay here with us. An American plane or dirigible of some sort is bound to show up before the summer is over. We can have made him a captive by that time and the land will belong to the United States as it should."

Eppley shook his head slowly. He could not dismiss the disturbing thought of who the plane's passengers might be.

"I'd be all for that," he agreed, "except that I'm afraid he has brought some one along with him. Some one that ought to get back."

McAlford looked up with quick understanding.

"Well, why not let's you and I make a quick flight back to the camp at Point Barrow, get help, and return with the proper trail of information behind us?"

Again Bliss negatived the proposal. "It wouldn't look well to steal his plane, in the first place. And in the second place, whoever happened to come would find Welchor in possession; which would, in a way, give him a certain right to the land as we have not yet officially established our claim to it. Also I still have a feeling that there is a chance the ZR-5 might be able to fly and that she will be here soon."

"You don't believe what he told us about an explosion aboard her?"

"I don't believe anything that liar tells us," snapped Bliss, "until I have seen it with my own eyes!"

"Well, what in sin and thunderation are you going to do?" cried the other. "I'm game for anything that will bring shame and misery to those sons-of-guns, Welchor

and Scammell and Olaf the Hunter—damn him!—and wait only your word to forward march!” Scotty struck a heroic pose, rifle gripped in both hands and cigar at the most defiant angle he could tilt it.

“Once more Fate answers our questions for us,” said Eppley quietly; and, taking his friend by both arms, turned him forcibly into a position from which he could look up the hill in the direction of the settlement.

Coming down the hill at top speed was a dog team and driver. Between clouds of powdery snow the galloping dogs and surging sledge kicked up both recognized the slender long-legged figure racing behind as their friend Eric. Apparently he had seen them before they had sighted him. For he came directly down across the broken floes to the tide crack and crashed out over the rough fast ice that lined the shore. He stopped his excited team by frantic use of his whip. Over one eye he wore a patch secured by a birdskin bandage encircling his head. His face was pale and haggard. His mouth worked as if to articulate speech. But all that he could gasp out was:

“He’s taken her! He’s taken her!”

“What? Who? Taken her where? And who’s *her*?” both men flung at him.

“Kristina—Olaf has taken her—gone away!” he panted.

“But the new man—the one who came in this flying machine?” snapped Bliss with an intolerable anxiety. “Is he in the village?”

Eric stared wildly at the plane. He seemed unable to concentrate on anything besides his own grief. McAlford jabbed him with his thumb.

“Come! Speak up! We want to know who came in this plane. And where he is. Maybe if you tell us that we can help you with your girl.”

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The Norseman's wide eyes swung around. His voice suddenly under control was hoarse with agitation.

"Yes, he is in the village. It is his fault! He sent Olaf!"

With a cry of grief he buried his face in his hands.

"I thought so," growled McAlford. "Out of the oil lake—out of the frying pan, so to speak—into a hotter fire than ever! That's us. Eh, mate?"

CHAPTER XXVI

TO THWART A ROGUE

AT BLISS' suggestion the thermos bottle was brought and the rest of the coffee poured into the distraught lover. He became calmer. And bit by bit he pieced together the story of his troubles since the moment he had disappeared behind the crest of the bank of the lake of oil at the mercy of Olaf the Hunter.

As Eppley had surmised, the bully, Olaf, had really had no thought of killing his fellow tribesman. Hatred of war and murder was too ingrained in the man's blood to permit him to go to such extremity. However, he had been thoroughly aroused and had struck Eric a savage blow in the face with the butt of the gun. Resulting bloody nose accounted for the gore the two men had found in the snow.

Apparently then he had had a revulsion of feeling and had led the half-stunned Eric back to his own sledge. He had given no further thought to rescue of the two unfortunates balanced on the edge of the lake at imminent peril of their lives.

"When I asked him to go back he said it served you right," explained Eric, "and that if you drowned, as he thought you probably would, it was your own fault for having come to our colony without invitation."

"Oh, he did, did he!" muttered Scotty truculently.

Eric made haste to explain that this sentiment was not shared by any other of the Norsemen.

"I didn't go immediately back to the village because Kristina is very fond of seal meat. So I came down

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here to the ice to kill one. I found the plane and realized that some one else must have arrived from your land. I was very excited and hurried back. When I arrived I found a big ugly man with a face that made me feel he was not to be trusted—”

“Our friend Welchor,” nodded McAlford with a wry face. “Good description. Go on.”

“He was behaving in a **very** disagreeable manner to Kristina’s father, who seemed to be objecting to something the man had done. Then my brother whispered to me that the stranger had asked for a volunteer to go by sledge to the south with some important papers. Olaf had stepped forward at once. The man gave him directions and Olaf started off almost immediately.”

“Alone?” asked Eppley.

Eric wrung his hands. “No, he took Kristina! I told you he took Kristina! And she didn’t want to go!”

His grief was pathetic.

Suddenly, as if some one had struck him, Bliss emerged from his lethargy.

“I see it!” he cried. “Welchor always shows more brains than I give him credit for. As soon as he found that we were here he realized the danger of his plans. He has the upper hand; yet he knows there is the chance that we might ambush him. If he can get final word south to the Orientals who employed him that he has really discovered the land and carried out his part of the contract he is safe. He can then collect the million dollars they have promised to pay him!”

“But why wouldn’t it be a great deal more profitable for him to stay and stake out claims to all this oil and mineral?” protested McAlford. “I believe you’re on the wrong track entirely.”

Bliss seized a handful of his friend’s shirt and shook him fiercely in the intensity of his conviction. “I’m *not*

on the wrong track! Welchor has been skating on thin ice all along. He doesn't want to linger in this land. He doesn't think about anything but that million. He has too long a criminal record behind him, I tell you, to dally around waiting for developments up here. He wants his pay so he can skip out at the earliest possible moment. All he has to do is to fix the fact that the land actually exists, that he was first to arrive here, and that those yellow men can claim it as planned."

Eric pushed himself in between the two. "But he's getting farther and farther away!" he wailed. "We'll never catch him if we don't hurry! Your gun is our only chance!"

"By gorry, that's right!" exploded Bliss. "We've got to act fast and furious right here and now. We've got to keep Welchor on the island and we've got to prevent Olaf from going south with the scoundrel's report. Eric, can you take us along?"

"That's what I came for!"

"Very well. . . . Scotty, put that plane out of commission. You have three minutes to do it in. Not permanently out. But fix it so those devils can't use it. Can you do it?"

For answer McAlford strode to the engine and with practiced fingers disconnected the electric leads. He held up the wires.

"If we hide these among the rocks he'll have to stay here or else walk home."

Eppley turned to the Norseman. "Now lead the way, old top. Do you think there is any chance of overtaking him?"

Before replying Eric cracked his whip over the heads of the impatient dogs and the next moment the sledge with its three passengers was bouncing back along the broken trail.

"He has to stop for meat," explained Eric between shouts at his galloping animals. "He will make the southern cape before he sleeps. There are urks and the weaker cattle there. I think he will take the caribou as he has no other hunters with him. We should go above his camp by way of the high land. Thus may we head him off."

The chase now settled down in earnest. Once around the shoulder of the volcano Olaf's single trail was joined and the dogs swung away into the east. The route led along the gently sloping southern coast of the land. The range of mountains ahead curved to eastward and paralleled the shore line.

"By George!" thought Bliss as he clung to the swaying sledge, "I'm going to visit this country some day in peace and enjoy it!"

Indeed, the beauty of the land was irresistible even in the midst of their fatigue and anxiety. To the right spread the pale-blue ice; to the left the rolling white land, broken here and there by soft brown outcrops of rock. Ahead the snow-clad peaks that stalked in lofty grandeur to the sea's very edge. And finally, just behind the travelers, the majestic volcano, notched halfway up its southern slope where the grassy village lay, and capped by a billowy cloud of ebony smoke.

The low sun had rolled behind one of the northern peaks when Eric called a halt to feed his dogs. He pointed out that he had brought very little supplies for fear that he could not make speed enough to overtake the fleeing Olaf.

The halt was made by a fissure in the rocks from which issued a thin column of white vapor. While the strangers were peering curiously into the hole Eric brought up a haunch of frozen musk ox. Attaching the meat to a seal-

skin line he lowered it about a fathom and secured the thong under a heavy stone.

"One of our natural boiling pots," he explained. "This country is full of them."

"I told you we have discovered another Iceland!" said Bliss.

"Only an infinitely richer one," ventured Scotty. "Can't you see the streams of tourists that will overrun the place ten years from now? Yellowstone Park won't be in it with this fascinating land! Just look at the magnificence of its scenery as well as the excitingness of its natural phenomena!"

"Yes," laughed his friend, "and I suppose there will be signs up: 'Don't feed the mammoths.' Do you imagine they will ever be any tamer than they are now?"

"Never," said Eric, with conviction. "We have tried for years to convert those beasts to the same friendly terms that practically every other animal enjoys if taken young. But we have had no success. The last urk we attempted to domesticate killed four people when it was less than a year old. They are the most vicious beasts we know."

Sharply the words came back a few hours later.

For Olaf was overtaken with unexpected suddenness. Apparently the huge Viking had felt the absolute necessity of securing an adequate supply of meat before beginning his six-hundred-mile trek across the polar ice and down the Greenland coast to the Danish trading posts. Whether he had had any misgivings about the trip was not clear. At any rate the three pursuers sighted his camp less than twenty miles from the volcano.

Eric had by this time broken away from the lowland and was traveling at least a thousand feet above the route his enemy had chosen. This made it possible for him to sight the fleeing pair without risking being seen.

TO THWART A ROGUE

Olaf's camp was in plain sight on the white southern slope of the coastal range. This lack of secrecy in his movements was to Bliss a sure sign of the man's self-assurance. Evidently his enormous size and strength made his position among the men of the colony one of unquestioned right in all he did. That Eric or any one else would dare dispute his departure, even though he had had the effrontery to take the daughter of Hroar the Leader with him, seemed to have had no bearing on his plans.

"I suggest that we stop here," said Eppley. "If he is going off to hunt we shall easily enough get hold of Kristina. And there is the chance that he may have left Welchor's papers behind him. If we can lay our hands on them we can kill two birds with one stone."

Eric shook his head disconsolately. "He will not dare leave Kristina in camp. He knows too well that she will escape if she has a chance."

Which proved to be the case. For after Olaf the Hunter had pitched his little skin tent, the watchers far above him saw him lead the girl out and start with her across the slope towards a broad pasture several miles eastward where a large herd of caribou were grazing. Under his arm he appeared to be carrying several of the cells.

When the two had dipped into an intervening depression in the land Eric led his companions at a trot towards the camp. As the winds had shifted around from seaward it was possible, by crouching, to place the tent between themselves and the dogs. Thus there was little risk of the animals raising an alarm.

To the delight of both the Americans Olaf had carelessly left Welchor's precious dispatches in his sledge bag. Bliss tore them open without hesitation.

"Thank heaven, Scotty!" he cried. "These will hang him higher than a kite!"

"That is, if he doesn't hang us first," said the other gloomily.

"We must hurry," urged Eric. "No man can hunt as fast as Olaf the Hunter. No man is so sagacious in difficulty."

Scotty held out the rifle. "He'll have to have some sagacity to sidestep the long arm of my little Winchester!"

But Eric's anxiety continued to increase while they hurried back up the slope.

"It's the urks," he explained. "There are several herds of them along the coast here. And even Olaf would be no match for a bull like the one that nearly did for me."

On reaching the level at which they had originally traveled they again turned east. But not for long. To their dismay there turned out to be a glacial gorge between them and the caribou pasture towards which Olaf was heading. This gorge or wide ravine was simply a huge notch carved in the face of the mountain by a river of ice that had flowed from the lofty comb of jagged peaks. Apparently precipitation in recent years had been less than in former times. For the glacier had retreated. Now it was but a blue-faced pendant far up among the precipitous crags. As a glacier always cuts a U-shaped groove, the walls of the gorge were nearly vertical.

"There they are!" said Eric suddenly.

Far down among the rocks, at least a thousand feet below, were visible what looked like two black ants crawling into the ravine from the side on which stood the pursuers. It was apparent that Olaf was determined to enter the depression and cross without trying to bring up his team. The logic of this was not plain, for he not only had to make the sharp descent in which he was now engaged; but after crossing the several hundred yards of

intervening floor of the gorge he would be forced to ascend the opposite wall before reaching the caribou pasture on the far side.

To McAlford's question Eric only shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "it is not like Olaf at all. He knows better—" He broke off abruptly. Some inner agitation suddenly tautened the lines of his face. ". . . Unless he has seen them further down," he muttered. "Come!" he snapped. "We must have a look."

Perplexed, the two followed him at a trot to a point of rock that projected at dizzy height out over the deep and snow-filled gorge. An exclamation of fear escaped the guide.

"I was afraid so!" wailed Eric. "See them?"

Far down along the lower reaches of the ravine was visible a number of round brownish patches. These patches had the appearance of large boulders. But to Eppley and McAlford, hearing a half-gasped monosyllable from Eric, these boulders suddenly took on the semblance of live animals. And when one moved, swayed sidewise, then reared upward on four stumpy legs they knew at once that they were looking at a herd of savage mammoths.

Olaf's strategy was now clear. He had evidently known of the presence of the herd. Fearing an encounter with them he had left his dogs well to the rear, and now was on his way to outflank the enemy. Once he had safely crossed and killed the caribou he wished for his southern trip he could return to his sledge, drive around by the sea ice, and pick up his meat before the stupid mammoths would be aware of his presence in the neighborhood. He was safe for two reasons: first, because the herd was asleep; and second, because he was to leeward of them so no scent went down to betray him.

Yet, as so often happens, the unexpected erased his

safety at a stroke. Either he or Kristina stepped on a loose rock at the very end of their descent. From far up where stood the breathless watchers this rock appeared but a pinpoint of black moving slowly down the white névé. But when it reached the mammoths and the enormous animals leaped angry and affrighted from their slumber there was no doubt about its size.

They saw Olaf clutch the maiden to him in alarm. Saw him hesitate. . . . Safety lay behind. Yet safety to the mighty hunter was but small consideration. Already the mammoths had seen him and came waddling up the snowy slope. Their infuriated snorts at having been disturbed were audible clear up where the three men stood like statues gazing down upon the scene.

Then Olaf chose. He chose the danger. Holding the girl by her wrist he raced across the narrow belt of snow between him and the opposite cliff. He should have reached his goal. He was a good runner. And the nearest mammoth was at least a hundred yards away. But the high spring sun had glazed the surface of the drifts in spots. And now, though the sun was high in the south and had softened the slope's white mantle, there still were wide glassy areas where a foothold was impossible.

Olaf struck one of these. The next instant he and the girl were sprawling. Downward they slid towards the slavering mouths of the waiting herd of irritated mammoths.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AVALANCHE

NO POWER on earth, it seemed, could save Olaf the Hunter, and poor Kristina. In horror-stricken silence the three men far above watched the doomed pair sliding slowly into the maw of death.

Once or twice it appeared as if they had caught a foothold. But Olaf in particular, probably because he was so much the heavier, continued on and on until it looked as though he might reach out and touch the nearest mammoth.

Indeed, the end would have come even quicker had not the ponderous animals found the deep snow too much for speed. With thunderous booming roars they waddled and stumped along towards their helpless victims.

Bliss was about to place his hands over his eyes to shut out the horrid sight. There was absolutely nothing to be done. To use the rifle would be ridiculous. At such a range he was as likely to kill Kristina or Olaf as to hit a mammoth. And even if he did hit one of the latter, it was unlikely that the bullet would find a vital spot. Also there were at least twenty in the herd.

Suddenly Eric became a madman. At least so it seemed to his unhappy companions. With a wild cry he sprang out into mid-air and fell sickeningly through space. It flashed across the minds of both men that in the extremity of his grief he was committing suicide. But, to their astonishment, he disappeared in the deep drifts far below, only to reappear again. He scrambled out onto the steep

slope. He fell upon his hands and knees and began working in crazy scooping movements into the snow. In half a minute he had rolled up a spherical mass of the sticky stuff. He hove against it, moved it, then fell back momentarily exhausted as the large ball rolled downward toward the scene of tragedy below.

It must be remembered that the snow was several fathoms deep, a whole winter's accumulation. That it was softened and mushed by the high June sun.

The ball swelled as it progressed. Swiftly it gained speed. Soon it fairly flew along. It became the size of a small house. It ran sidewise at one point where the floor of the gully tilted and collided with the jagged wall of rock. It ruptured into at least a score of fragments. Most of these continued. They in turn grew large as they accumulated more snow. Then, as if by a miracle, the whole floor of the gorge began to move. It moved much more slowly than did the racing spheres. But it slid with brisk acceleration. A dull thudding roar swelled, filled the great ravine, and rose in an awful tumult to the petrified men on the pinnacle a thousand feet above.

Both Olaf and Kristina must have seen the avalanche rushing towards them. Both must have fully appreciated their peril. But only the active girl was able to make a move to save herself. With an almost superhuman effort she scrambled to her feet and ran, half falling, swiftly across the few rods between herself and safety. Just as the thundering cataract of snow and rocks engulfed Olaf and the herd she sprang to a fingerhold among the jutting granite splinters and pulled herself by a matter of inches from the dreadful fate that had overtaken her erstwhile lover and the herd of ravening mammoths.

"Well," ejaculated McAlford when power of speech returned, "that was the tidiest piece of work I've seen in many a day! A case of a man-made avalanche was re-

ported during the Klondike rush ; but I never believed the story till this minute."

But Bliss did not pause to answer. Scrambling down the rocky precipice he sprang off into the snow and dashed after Eric, who was already running at top speed towards the point at which his betrothed had disappeared.

Kristina lay in a heap. But she was quite unhurt, being only faint from fright and the exertion of her last frantic efforts. Of Olaf or the mammoths there was no sign. At one point far down near the sea-ice a shaggy brown leg and an ivory tusk protruded from the snowy mausoleum. Both twitched convulsively in the death struggles of their colossal possessor.

No time was lost in making their way back to camp. Eric's and the dead man's teams combined were none too much for the haste Bliss felt must be made if Welchor were fully to be thwarted in the deviltry he was bound to attempt when he discovered his plane had been tampered with.

"And there's always the possibility that the ZR-5 might arrive," he observed with unquenched optimism.

But McAlford refused to consider such an eventuality. "She was too damaged when we left her," he said. "And there's bound to be some foundation of truth in what those blokes told us about the explosion aboard her."

"I don't care," persisted the other stoutly. "I shall keep on believing that she may come until I know positively that she can't."

On reaching the brow of the hill to the eastward of the settlement Bliss asked Eric to camp outside for the night. Kristina had been unable to give any information further than that the new arrivals were living in the same house set aside for Eppley and McAlford. If they had brought any passengers with them in the plane she had not been told about it. She had not even set eyes on Scammell

before she had been snatched away by Olaf and made to accompany him on his sledge.

"He put a thong across my mouth," she added, and pointed to two deep blue bruises on the tender skin of her pretty lips. Bliss saw the Norseman's fists clench.

"Never mind, Eric," he soothed him, "she's all yours now."

But the Norseman's anxiety persisted. "Suppose the new man from the south tries to revenge himself upon us?" he suggested.

"Don't worry," growled Scotty. "He's got other fish to fry just now. And two of the fishiest are right here before you!"

Close to the village the two men stopped to reconnoiter. But there seemed to be no one about save a few children. As it was still mid-afternoon the people were probably engaged in their community labors, or else in the cavern attending one of the radio concerts which fascinated them so.

Out of the cavern's mouth issued the same musical hum that tokened the peacefulness of the volcano. "What a comfort," thought Bliss, "to listen night and day to the crooning song of the earth's quiescence. To know with a certainty beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is for the present no peril from the immeasurable forces of subterranean fires which sooner or later may burst forth to annihilate the land."

"Do you actually believe what Hroar told us about the hum of his cells being in tune with the earth's vibrations?" asked Scotty as they cautiously made their way towards the side entrance of the village green.

"I certainly do. It has long been known that sixty miles below the surface of the earth the pressure and temperature are so great that solid rock there flows like putty. Yet the inner core is not rock as we know it.

THE AVALANCHE

scientists believe it to be more of the nature of meteoric steel."

But Bliss's erudition was sadly lost upon his friend. For by this time they had entered the grassy area and were approaching the little stone house in which Kristina had said Welchor was established. McAlford had left the rifle with Eric on Eppley's insistence. For, despite the unscrupulousness of the two scoundrels, it was likely, so Bliss had pointed out, that the Norsemen would not tolerate any sort of strife within the limits of their settlement. Therefore to make a show of weapons even against Welchor was to risk losing favor with the local public.

Clad in their brown wool shirts the two men were inconspicuous. They easily reached the door of their habitation without exciting the curiosity of the few people about.

But the house was empty. Apparently nothing had been touched. If Welchor and Scammell lived there they evidently had no baggage to speak of.

"Where do you suppose he is?" Bliss asked anxiously.

"Right here, my friend," replied a familiar voice behind him.

Both spun about. There, framed in the doorway, offensively self-assured as ever, stood Thorne Welchor. In each hand he carried a revolver which he held fixed upon the two ambushed men while he spoke.

"Now," said he coolly, "we'll sit down and talk this business over."

There was a harsh and merciless note in his voice that gave neither listener any hope of consideration at the hands of the rogue who had such good cause to hate them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THREATS

“**S**IT there,” went on Welchor, and indicated with a nod of his head the low bench across the room. With his toe, so as not to take his eyes off the two men, he closed the door. “Now fold your hands in your laps. And no impertinence or I’ll do what I ought to have done long ago!”

“Meaning—?” queried Bliss insolently.

A vicious look and a slight jerk towards him of the gun in the villain’s right hand were sufficient reply; and also showed the irascible mood the man was in. No wonder, too. For, despite the smoothness with which his plans had gone, as well as the success attending his arrival at the new land, here still in the way of his final collection of one million dollars cold cash were the same pair of inextinguishable Yankees over whom he had been stumbling for nearly a week.

“First of all, I want to tell you,” he resumed, leaning watchfully against the wall, “that nothing you can do can stop me now. You both think you are pretty smart. You particularly—” he inclined his head towards Eppley. “But Thorne Welchor, Esquire, has always proved smarter than those who try to meddle with his plans. I repeat, therefore, that you may as well give up here and now because I have dispatched a messenger to the south with final details of my discovery. Furthermore, among the papers of this report is a voucher of the truth of all that I say signed by a man who is qualified to judge.”

"Whom, may I ask?" quoth Eppley, squirming slightly to feel with a secret glow of satisfaction the packet of papers just mentioned snugly sewed inside his shirt.

"Admiral Beckett," came the startling reply.

Bliss half sprang from his seat. "You don't mean to say *he's* with you!" he cried.

"Inspecting the laboratories now," continued Welchor with half a sneer. "He'll not be glad to see you either. For he, too, realizes what a fool you are. Indeed, he said when he arrived at Point Barrow that he was glad that you had left because he was saved thereby the trouble of having to put you under arrest for the whole series of misconducts of which you have been guilty."

"But Joan—Miss Beckett?"

"In the cavern with her father." The scoundrel's sneer broadened to a grin of real entertainment. "I wouldn't be so anxious to see her if I were you. She thinks considerably less of you than her father does; which is about two notches below nothing!"

Eppley's lips came together in a thin line of stubborn fury that had none of the heat a man of less steady character might have shown. A cold fury, too, it was, which would have made the florid Welchor squirm had he known of its existence even though he was armed. For once Bliss Eppley was thoroughly and deeply aroused he became an antagonist 'twere safer to avoid.

But what could the man's purpose be? And why had he spoken with such assurance about the helplessness of the two men before him? Of course he believed that Olaf had gotten away south with the dispatches and should reach his destination within the month. But what was the final success of which he felt so cocksure at the present moment?

These questions soon enough were answered.

"I wish to make myself clear," went on the captor.

"When I reached this settlement and discovered you were both here alive, which I admit surprised me, I immediately set about the expedition of which I have already spoken: a driver to take my papers south. This once and for all would settle the matter of my report which I preferred not to trust to your dishonest Alaskan communications."

"That's an insult to be remembered," said Bliss to himself.

"They told us you two were at the lake. We had already prospected that body and had discovered it was oil. We followed you, but somehow missed your trail. My friend Olaf said he left you sitting on the bank. I perceived at once that you would discover the plane. So I left Scammell there at the lake with orders to place a candle in such a way that it would burn to the edge of the seepage and set it afire."

A muttered exclamation escaped McAlford.

"Yes," chuckled the other, "it will make a very nice blaze. And you two will be the ones who did it!"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I made it plain to the Norsemen how anxious we were to find you because we happened to know that, as you were our enemies, you would do all in your power to inflict damage on this land. In consequence, when Scammell pretended to go back and hunt for you the people were very grateful. They would not do this themselves because they were afraid of your rifle. Which, I am happy to see, you have had the sense to leave behind you."

"But it doesn't make sense!" persisted Bliss.

"I'm hanged if I see what the fool is driving at either," growled McAlford.

Welchor's expression went a shade blacker at the insult. "It's this: You both seem already to know that Scammell and I shall get a price out of our discovery.

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We care nothing for what the land may mean after we leave. So if you two will now sit tight and keep your hands off my plans I promise to give you a clean field after I am settled up. I might even shell out a little velvet for you when I reach the south."

"And if we don't?"

"If you don't, that lake will be in flames within the hour!"

McAlford groaned audibly.

"And you two will be held to blame. Even the Admiral has been primed to believe you were planning the trick to get even with me. Think what the loss will mean! Goodness only knows how many billions of barrels of good oil gone to waste! These people will likely tear you to pieces in their anger! . . . And all you have to do to save yourselves is to give me your word that you will be good, show me where the leads are you took from my plane, and I'll send word down to Scammell to put his little light out and there won't be any fire after all. What do you say?"

Eppley made no reply. Not that for a moment he entertained the idea of personal profit. But he wished to be sure that he made no false move at this critical time.

Welchor's goal was plain enough. All that he and Scammell had contracted to do so far as new land was concerned was to discover and establish their claim to it in order that it might in turn be claimed by the Oriental conspirators who had bribed them to eliminate other competitors for the prize.

And now this goal was all but won. Only the slender chance that Eppley or McAlford might convince Washington of the truth before the evil bargain were consummated stood between the unscrupulous man and full success. Hence his efforts to eliminate the two before him from his problem.

Moreover, it was clearer now than ever how hesitant he was to wreak physical vengeance upon them. One single act of violence might swiftly arouse American hostility against him before he could collect the coveted million dollars.

Wherefore it was still further obvious that he sought to influence both of them by bribery as well as by threatening to do what seemed irreparable damage to one of the new land's most precious natural resources, namely, burning the lake of oil.

"But," argued Bliss rapidly to himself, "if we let him have his way all is lost, no matter if we do save the lake of oil. For his way means that the new land can never belong to the United States on the basis of my discovery."

One course was, therefore, open: stubborn refusal to entertain for a moment the man's nefarious offer. Bliss shook his head.

"Nothing doing, Welchor."

The baffled crook took a quick step forward. His lower lip protruded menacingly. A scowl of anger lined his brow.

"Turn me down, will you?" he snarled. "Very well, then I'll tell you one more little trick that's nestling in my sleeve. You do not yet appreciate the fact that since my arrival the Norsemen, or whoever they are, have realized your profession is to foster war. They hate war. They despise any one who tolerates it. Knowing now what you are they will lose no time in ordering you out of their settlement."

"Now, Mister Welchor," mocked McAlford, "I'm a very nervous man. Don't frighten me that way or I shan't be able to sleep to-night!"

"You think I am joking, do you?"

"Either that or crazy," came the prompt retort.

"Very well, my friends, let me inform you that you

will be very fortunate to escape this crowd of antiwar fanatics with your lives. When I explained your military duties at home they were furious. Furthermore, it may interest you to know that if you make any further trouble I shall reveal the fact that Admiral Beckett is in the same business. Now really, Eppley, it would be rotten of you to be responsible for the death or damage of your best girl's father!"

For a moment Bliss saw red. There seemed no limit to which the fiend across from him would not go. Bribery, threats, and finally this sneering promise to put Joan Beckett's father in peril of his life, tokened a villainous cunning and imagination almost inhuman.

"Now you, McAlford," went on the taunting voice, "sit quietly while your friend takes that bit of line from off the mantelpiece and binds you. I don't trust either of you any more."

As Bliss rose to get the line he faced again the stuffed sea birds which perched upon the narrow shelf above the hearth. He recalled that on his previous examination of the specimens he had found to his surprise that they were filled with some sort of cement. Their bodies were, in effect, solid rock. There was no time to signal McAlford of the plan that flashed across his mind. There was no time even to invent some decently plausible pretext by which he might distract Welchor's attention for the split second that he needed. So he took the one long chance that offered. Glancing towards the door, which was open but a crack, he exclaimed:

"My God, Welchor, there they come!"

It worked. The scoundrel, taken off his guard, flashed a swift glance over his shoulder which gave Bliss Eppley the one split second he required. He seized the feathered lump of stone and hurled it with unerring aim at the big man's neck. With a sharp loud smack it struck. Welchor

went down as if he had been shot. The two men landed on him almost at the same instant. And before he had really regained sense enough to ask weakly what had struck him he sat trussed and weaponless on the same low bench where his mulish victims had been sitting three minutes before.

"Now," observed Bliss, wiping his hands, "we shall continue our conversation where we left off."

"May I have your permission to light my third to last cigar?" asked Scotty. "My nerves are all on edge from Mister Welchor's terrible description of what is going to happen if we fail to mind him."

"Don't worry," foamed the captive, as he squirmed in the painfully tight lashings which both mariners knew only too well how to execute, "you're both caught in your own net no matter what you do to me."

The words were scarcely out of the man's mouth when the door was flung open and Eric hurtled into the room, his face as pale as death.

"Run for your lives!" he gasped. *"They're coming!"*

"Now just wait a minute, old scout," entreated Scotty. "You always get excited in times like this."

"But they're coming! All the men! Even the women! And they will throw you off the cliff in front of the village if they catch you!"

Suddenly the Norseman's eye fell upon Welchor sitting with a smug smile upon the bench. "He did it!" he screamed. "He told them all that has made madmen of my friends!"

Bliss laid his hand on the excited Viking's arm. "That's all right," he snapped. "But don't waste time. Quick! Are the girl and the father safe—the ones who came from my country with this crook?"

"More than safe," was the prompt reply. "The people

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liked them at once. They are lodged in Holgrimson's own house."

"Then we must for the present escape."

A distant murmur trickled through the window. Bliss gripped the arm he held. "And it is equally important that we put this fellow where he can do no harm. I fear for both the father and the girl so long as he is free."

Eric ran a trembling palm across his ashen brow. "You might go into the volcano. There is a passage up among the lizards. There is a door—"

From without burst a chorus of shouts and cries, the yelps of a human wolf pack. Through the window were visible the villagers disgorging from the cavern's entrance. By their angry faces and hoarse voices their ugly mood was apparent.

There was no time to escape. Even if they had escaped there was no place to go. Both Americans saw in a flash that they were cornered. But being good Americans they determined to make the best of a very bad situation. Bliss held out one of the automatics.

"Here's the other gun, Scotty. I'm not deserting Joan and her father. The very best we can do for both of them just now is to get Welchor and ourselves out of the way until these emotional villagers cool off. Now help me get this table and bench before the door."

Unceremoniously tumbling the helpless Welchor to the matting he seized the heavy pieces and swung them between him and the angry mob already battering at the sandstone panels.

CHAPTER XXIX

ESCAPE

WITH Welchor under the table and Eppley and McAlford backed against the wall, each armed and waiting, Eric suddenly regained his wandering senses. Apparently the quiet and studious life he led had unfitted him for facing imminent peril with any sort of equanimity. Now he emerged from the curious stupor into which he momentarily had fallen and literally flung himself upon Eppley.

"You haven't a chance!" he cried. "We must go into the volcano!"

"But how are we going to get there?"

Without waiting to reply Eric dashed into the next room. He kicked aside the blue matting. He fumbled for a moment at the floor, running his trembling fingers along the interstice between two of the broad sandstone slabs that spread from wall to wall. Then to the other's astonishment one of these slabs swung silently downward revealing a stone staircase that led away into darkness. The next instant a faint blue glow illuminated the passageway as Eric switched on its lights. He spoke quickly.

"We are in one of the old houses. All are connected with the laboratories for the convenience of the workers. We can escape this way. I can lock the door on the far side. We shall be hid before they can overtake us through the main entrance."

Bliss sprang back into the front room. He flung a word of command to McAlford. He stooped and dragged the bound captive to the exit.

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"Where can we leave our man?" he asked when they were safely through and the slab had swung back into place.

Eric glanced upward with set jaws as the scramble of many feet overhead indicated the entry of the angry villagers. Before he replied he watched the slab tremble with the efforts of the pursuers to force it open. Then he said:

"I used to live here. I had a small workshop off to one side. We can leave him there. He will not be discovered. But you two should go on. It may be necessary for you to leave the volcano altogether. I shall take you to the upper level. Only one besides Holgrimson and myself know the way. There you can be secure for the present. Also from there I can assist you to escape."

"Escape," thought Bliss, "is the last thing in the world I'd planned. However, this certainly is best for the present."

Apparently the narrow winding corridor through which they hurried did not connect with the main laboratories for some distance. The unceasing hum of the warning cells came faintly down and somehow lent a comforting note to the unhappy plight in which the explorers now found themselves.

There was not the shadow of a doubt that the Norsemen had meant business when they sought the two men at the house. Welchor had surely done well his work in poisoning their minds. This fact was not lost on Eppley; indeed, it had made him more insistent that their captive be carried along and deposited in the little offset from the main passage. There he had been left bound and gagged. How long he should have to stay no one could say. But there was this comfort to the men who abandoned him to suffer, namely that the scoundrel brought it all upon himself.

The tunnel grew narrower and narrower. Frequently rough staircases had to be climbed. Steadily the route angled upwards. All had now to walk single file. The electric lights having come to an end Eric drew from his shirt a small torch which cast the same faint bluish light as the other lamps had.

Hum of the warning cells grew louder. It seemed as if the sound were carried up on a swift draft of air that eddied past the hurrying men.

"So long as we can hear that music I somehow feel safe," said Scotty. "If ever we get home again I'm going to make it my first duty to report discovery of this wonderful earthquake alarm."

"I should think so," agreed Bliss. "Yet up here it isn't so much for earthquakes as it is to warn the colony against an eruption of the volcano."

At this moment the passage began perceptibly to open out. Suddenly from ahead came a gleam of daylight. Eric extinguished his torch as the luminance of sunshine made their way plain. A blast of cold air swirled above their heads.

Rounding a corner the three came abruptly to a huge granite doorway swung upon metal hinges and arranged to slide over the floor of the cave on rollers. It was a striking example of the ponderous permanence with which the Norsemen built whatever they planned to use for long.

Just beyond the door was a space about the size of an ordinary living-room from which came the daylight. On one side its wall was slit from ceiling to floor by irregular cracks in the rocks through which was visible the snowy plain to northward of the volcano.

"Why, we're on the back side!" exclaimed McAlford. "There's the lake of oil just below us."

Before replying Eric strode over to the widest of the

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cracks and peered out. He turned with an expression of sadness and relief.

"You are safe here," said he. He inclined his head towards the enormous granite door. "That used to close upon our prisoners. We placed them here to starve to death. For many years we have had no prisoners. As I told you, only Hroar and I and one other can open it. I shall leave you now and lock the door behind me."

"Here, wait a minute!" burst Scotty. "We haven't any food. It is cold as sin, too. Isn't there some way out besides the route we came?"

"Yes, there is. Back a ways along the corridor we have just traversed there is a branch that leads to the northern slope of the volcano. I would take you there now but I am afraid we should be seen. Therefore, I shall return to the village. In the excitement I can get my dogs and drive around here unnoticed and rescue you. After what you have done for me—Kristina and me—it will be but a small return. You may take my team and escape across the ice to your own country."

"Eric, you fool!" groaned Bliss. "Don't you know that I can't do what you suggest?"

"You mean you don't want to go back?"

Bliss shook his head in desperation at the other's stupidity. "No. Were you willing to leave your girl to her fate when Olaf ran off with her? Now, can't you understand that I am worried about the father and daughter who came in the plane. They are alone out there with that man Scammell who is just as much of a fiend as Welchor is."

"Well, my friend, there is another way. But it is a very dangerous way. And even if you did succeed in passing through it, which no man has ever done, you should certainly be killed on reaching the village. Look."

Stepping to the far corner of the room Eric pointed to an opening in the wall scarcely two feet high.

"That leads to the laboratories eventually. But it leads through the lizards."

"Lizards?" laughed Scotty. "I'm not afraid of lizards. In fact, after Mister Melchor's threats I'm not much afraid of anything."

Eric shrugged. "Perhaps my knowledge of your language is not so good. I thought a lizard was an animal with a long tail that crawled with his belly close to the ground; had a long nose—"

"Exactly," put in Bliss. "There's nothing the matter with your language."

"But they are pretty large," persisted the Viking.

"How big?" asked Scotty in sudden suspicion.

"About twice the size of a seal."

"*Twice the size of a seal!*" gasped the other. "Man, they're not lizards. They're crocodiles!"

Before Eric had time to explain further a distant murmur sifted up through the open door. At once all three knew the villagers were still in hot pursuit. The murmur became a muffled clamor.

"They know the way up here!" exclaimed Eric. "I must go at once!"

In a step he reached the granite portal. Slowly it began to swing.

"Do not worry, my friends. You are safe."

The clamor was now an uproar, a growing volume of sound that flowed up the long tunnel in a cataract of cries and shouts. Then with a crash that shook the very pavement on which the two fascinated watchers stood the colossal barrier swung into place and silence fell.

Absent-mindedly McAlford fumbled in his pocket. He pulled out something that might have been most any kind

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of filth. He shook his polished head till its tousled fringe sailed out.

“My last cigar,” he said in mournful tone. “My very last. . . . And maybe not because I haven’t any more!” he added with a sudden inspiration.

CHAPTER XXX

CORNERED

BLISS walked to the outer wall to escape the acrid fumes of his friend's mutilated cigar and for want of better occupation proceeded to review their new plight with an unbiased mind.

"Does it occur to you, Scotty," he said after a bit, "that if Eric and Hroar Holgrimson meet disaster we're absolutely stuck?"

"It does," groaned the other. "But I wish you wouldn't remind me of it. We couldn't possibly squirm out of any of those cracks. Even you with your sylph-like form couldn't. As for me!" The big man shrugged expressively. "Then there is that granite door between us and a mob of raving maniacs, though it is too thick to let any of their music through. And finally, the one means of egress, exit, or escape, whatever you might call it, is full of crocodiles!"

"Lizards," corrected Bliss, laughingly despite his anxiety. "If there are prehistoric mammoths still alive in this strange country I see no reason why antediluvian reptiles should not have crawled up into these crevices and escaped destruction. Think of the honor of discovering them!"

"You're welcome to it!" snapped McAlford. "It's not the kind of fame that appeals to me, investigating a cave full of crocodiles, or lizards if you want to call them so. In the dark, too. Do you realize that?"

Bliss turned suddenly and clenched his hands to fists.

"I don't care if they're mammoths and crocodiles put

together!" he exploded. "If Eric doesn't return in a hurry I'm going to take a chance! I am still not sure about Joan. According to Eric she and her father are safe enough for the present. But heaven only knows what will happen when that skunk Scammell returns to the village. Even though we had to accept this refuge temporarily in order to escape those lunatics, they will cool off in a little while."

"Look here," persisted Scotty stubbornly, "there is no use making fools of ourselves. If Eric claims reptiles are in there I believe him. He has never lied to us yet. Also, as far as your friends are concerned, I'm just as anxious to help them out as you. But we're a whole lot more likely to be of assistance in the long run by keeping our skins whole, than by converting them into a pair of corpses."

Having reached this impasse in their views each turned his back upon the other. Scotty walked over and peered gloomily out of the crevices through which he could see the white plateau and a little of the sea ice. A black speck far below indicated where the disabled plane still rested. That was the only sign of man's work in the vast spaces over which his eyes roved.

Suddenly he stiffened. North and east he was able to make out the thin blue line of the western edge of the lake of oil. Further spread of the lake was cut off by the rocky wall which so circumscribed his field of vision. Something moving along this strip of blue caught his eye. At first he thought it might be a sledge. But at this distance no sledge would appear so large.

"Bliss," he burst, "did you understand Welchor to say that he had left Scammell with orders to set fire to the lake if no word to the contrary came down?"

Eppley sprang to his companion's side. "By Jove, I'd forgotten about that!"

"Well, isn't that smoke along the edge of the lake?"

There was no need to reply. For by this time the moving object had grown to a globular mass of black. And even while the two horrified men watched, it swelled to a rolling billowy cloud of inky vapor.

The lake of oil was afire!

With incredible rapidity the conflagration spread. As if a Titan brush were enameling the great reservoir an ebony hue, the blue strip slowly disappeared under the rising tide of smoke above it. And while the main body of the lake was invisible to the two men, the enormous size of the smoke cloud left no doubt that it was being wholly sacrificed to the hands of the vandals who had flung Nature's treasures into the sewer of their boundless avarice.

Standing in speechless despair at the dreadful spectacle both men suddenly became sharply conscious of a strange sound which had not been audible before.

"What's that?" queried Eppley with the sharpness of nerves on edge.

But McAlford only eyed him dumbly and shook his head.

The former sprang to the granite door and pressed his ear against it. But without success. In a stride he reached the opening to the lizard's den and stuck his head and shoulders in.

"They'll bite you!" warned McAlford in a hollow voice, which contained no note of humor.

Bliss recoiled.

"It's the warning!" he exclaimed.

"The *what?*"

"The warning cells! Put your head in here and you can hear the roaring of them! A while ago I could just make out the music that meant safety. Now they are blaring! Listen!"

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With paling faces both men knelt before the orifice and strained their ears. Unmistakably drifted in upon them a distant roar. And while neither had heard before the cell alarm break loose, yet from careful descriptions both by Hroar Holgrimson and by Eric there was no reason now to doubt that this was its fateful sound. The bowels of the earth were for the moment out of tune with the cosmic rhythm of the universe. Minor key of the broken cadence was herein caught by human cunning and magnified that puny man might flee to safety. For how could any living creature dare to stand and face convulsion of the withered rocky crust on which we live?

There flashed through both men's mind a vision of swirling heated gases, rivers of fire boiling up from the abyss below, eddying through the rockbound passageways until it oozed hissingly upon them. And there would be the volcano's gulping paroxysms, spasmodic quiverings of the mountainside, until whole slabs of it fell away or were torn asunder by subterranean explosion, to disgorge the molten lava to the freedom that it sought.

But what could the two men do? A move in any direction presaged death in horrible form. Yet to stay where they were was to die a thousand deaths in the suspense of waiting for the subterranean flames to creep upon them.

No prison could have been more demoniacally secure. Three walls of the rock-bound cell in which they stood were hundreds of feet thick, solid lava to the mountain's face. The fourth wall, creviced as it was, presented but a grid of basaltic columns each thicker than a man's bare body, and separated only by narrow chinks through which the outer sunshine trickled.

To be sure, there were the two exits. But the door of granite which Eric had locked outside must have weighed five tons. No human strength could budge it. And the other way: a ghastly nightmare of horrid reptiles, loath-

some clammy creatures, that should have lived and died a million years before.

Moreover, even should the wretched pair escape, what had they then to face but torture at the hands of the madmen who chose to believe their colony had been betrayed?

And now, surmounting all the unspeakable agony of mental apprehension, they stood transfixed and listened to the roaring cells which rang a death knell sure as sunrise from the cauldron of the mountain's fiery depths.

As they stood contemplating the black mouth of the entrance to the lizards' den, cold sweat bathing their foreheads, their jaws gripped to prevent a telltale quivering that had permeated every muscle in their bodies, something else of a dreadful import was happening just behind them.

At first it was but a wisp of vapor drifting in between the chinks that led to the outside world. One would have said that a bit of grayish wool was floating before the breath of an idle breeze. Soon there were two such wisps, then three more, four—all furtively sifting in through the narrow apertures that had been filled with lovely sunlight.

Presently these wisps of smoke, for that they were, combined as they flowed along the still air of the room and formed a thin cloud. It was a very thin cloud. Out in the open, say on a street crowded with automobiles, neither man would have given half a thought to such a cloud. The same was said of the drift of insidious poison gas across No Man's Land in France. Yet that sinister drift fell upon men's throats and throttled them with such swiftness of asphyxiation that often not a single soldier lived to tell the tale.

It was Eppley looking down who first remarked the smoke. He did not at once turn to investigate its origin. His mind was too intent upon the already hideous complication of perils that beset himself and friend. When,

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after a moment, he did glance around, the daylight had been all but blotted out. The little room was filled with choking fumes.

It was to his credit that at once he realized whence came this final straw upon the burden of their plight. So enormous had the cloud of billowing vapor from the burning lake of oil become that it had drifted down upon the upper slopes of the volcano and now was smothering them in black.

A question flashed across his half-stunned mind:

"Could the flaming lake of oil account in any way for the eruption about to break?"

But this was not a time for speculation.

"No choice!" he hurled at the gaping McAlford.

He began to tug at his outer shirt. It still retained some of the crude oil that had been soaked up during their unhappy visit to the lake. He tore it off and by help of his foot rent it into pieces.

"Take this," he barked. "Light it. Your automatic is loaded. Come!" He dropped to his knees before the hole.

"Not in there!" half sobbed Scotty.

Over his shoulder as he crawled Bliss hoarsely made reply:

"It's our only chance! If I've got to die I'm going to do it fighting!"

Which, as he afterward declared, when Scotty bantered him for his bravery, was far more heroic than he felt.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LIZARDS

BLISS lit his torch almost at once. He was leading the way and he wanted to have a look at one of the "crocodiles," as Scotty insisted on calling them, before he laid his bare hand on the animal.

The tunnel enlarged rapidly and soon both men were able to walk upright and abreast. Somehow or other, now that they were embarked upon their mad effort to escape the eruption indicated by the howling alarm cells, their courage had returned. Both had felt certain that once they entered the passageway which Eric declared led to the lizards' den they would at once come face to face with the loathsome reptiles. Added to this was their agonizing nervousness about the eruption. Hroar had not been at all specific as to the interval of time between the sounding of the alarm and the catastrophic tragedy which it signified. Now that the alarm had been going for several minutes and also that they had traversed at least a hundred yards of the tunnel towards the lizards, a shade of self-confidence began to assert itself in their actions.

Eppley kept a bit ahead, for his major apprehension still was the eruption. McAlford, in greater trepidation about the nightmarish creatures he expected to encounter at any moment, tended to lag behind.

As the tunnel twisted and turned it continued to grow larger and wider. Also the roaring sound of the alarm continued its incessant though distant uproar.

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"Hanged if it doesn't sound exactly as if a whole lot of gas engines were going at once!" exclaimed McAlford.

The tunnel turned suddenly. Bliss nearly pitched headlong into a sort of crater or dark well some twenty feet in diameter. He clutched his friend's arm on the very brink of the inky chasm.

"Gorry Maud!" croaked the other. "Is this the end of it?"

For a few seconds the answer to Scotty's question seemed to be an unmitigated 'yes.' For even by holding up their blazing torches no escape from their hazardous position presented itself.

"But *where* are the lizards?" was on the tongue of each man to ask.

The ledge on which they stood extended on either side around the circular well of rock, but plainly narrowed to but an inch or so long before it reached the opposite wall. Overhead the ceiling was roughly visible in the torches' flare. Below them fifteen feet or so could be seen the floor of the place covered with what appeared to be rounded boulders. Any means of descent was absent. Not a crevice nor a cranny into which a toe or a finger might be placed.

"And there's the way out," said McAlford, while the other bent down and studied the vertical wall for some signs of a foothold. He pointed towards an irregular opening on the far side through which came the faint bluish glow of electric lights as well as the interminable roaring of the alarm cells.

But Bliss never answered. He sprang back clutching at his companion's legs and yanked him into the tunnel from which they had just emerged.

"*What* the mischief?" blurted McAlford. "You didn't see—?"

"The *floor!*" gasped Bliss, his breath coming in sharp jerks. "Those boulders on the floor—!"

"Yes?"

"*I saw—one—move!*"

Scotty crept to the edge of the abyss. Cautiously he held his torch so that its light fell upon the dark brown lumps below. As he looked one of the lumps quivered, writhed up and over sidewise, revealing a white and scaly belly to which were attached four thick legs terminating in long gleaming black claws. The body was about two feet in diameter. The tail was at least ten feet in length. The jaws ran back from a pointed snout for a distance equal to a man's arm from wrist to shoulder. As the horrified Scotty watched, the jaw of the prehistoric lizard swung open in a gigantic yawn disclosing double rows of murderous white teeth, then whipped together with a snap that made him dodge involuntarily.

"I don't care!" he whined. "I don't care one hang what happens to us now! I'll never go down there!"

Bliss, feeling much the same surge of nauseating fear that had swept his friend's nerve completely away, was unable for a moment to reply. Then with an effort he regained control of his emotions and leaned over the wretched man cowering at his feet.

"Come, come! We're not done for yet!" he exclaimed. "We are armed. And those beasts are bound to be terrified at fire. If we throw one of our torches down there in such a way as to drive them into a corner we can make a dash for the outlet on the other side and escape before they can possibly get us. Now watch."

Unrolling the whole ball of his shirt that made the torch he held, he turned it into a fire bomb. Its flames sprang up and illuminated brightly the entire cavern. That there was no other escape than the square doorway below and opposite was now made certain. That the

sleeping reptiles covered the entire floor was equally and horribly certain.

Bliss stepped to the edge. Scotty, torn between terror and a dreadful curiosity, followed.

"The minute they get out of the way jump and run for your life!" ordered Bliss.

Raising the ball of fire above his head he pointed his automatic at the lizard nearest the entrance and pulled the trigger. The next instant the flaming missile hurtled downward squarely into the center of the curving backs that had begun to squirm and rise the moment that the shot rang out. Mingled with the myriad echoes of the pistol rose a chorus of loathsome squeals and gargling hisses.

Both men toed the brink of the well ready to jump. McAlford inspirited by the consternation the firebrand spread among the enormous lizards held his torch aloft. Both gripped their revolvers ready to use them when the moment came.

At first it seemed as if only a riot had been precipitated among the reptiles. Those nearest the flaming mass of oily rags at once scrambled outward in a frenzy of fear. But their escape was not at once attained. For those further away, still stupid from their torpid slumber, construed the move only as an attack upon their peace and quiet. Whereat they resisted their bed mates' onrush with a vigorous counterattack accompanied by grunts and bloodcurdling guttural roars.

But it is an axiom of nature that the strength of fear is greater than that of anger. So the infuriated defenders of the outboard berths were, in the space of a few moments, forced to retreat before their panic-stricken brethren fleeing before the flames. In consequence, those beyond soon had a glimpse of the licking firebrand; and they in turn did their best to escape.

ZR WINS!

The sum total result was that within less than a minute of Eppley's strategic stroke the floor below was cleared. Before the door one huge reptile lay motionless. In the center still burned the oily rags. On either side, huddled noisily against the walls, were half a hundred frightened monsters that slobbered and bit and squealed against their kind.

"Jump!" shouted Eppley.

Like a pair of rubber balls the two men struck and bounded to the door. Probably before the lizards even saw them they had darted through and onward toward their goal.

The tunnel led upward again. It was wide and contained electric lights that by their soft blue glow made the torches unnecessary. Suddenly Bliss halted in his tracks.

"*Listen!*" he hissed. McAlford caught himself sharply.

From just around a bend in the tunnel came a familiar voice. Both recognized it as Scammell's. He was speaking angrily. He paused. Then, after a moment of silence, there came to the straining ears of the anxious pair a low but distinctly feminine outcry.

Bliss Eppley gripped his friend's arm with a ferocity that made even the well-padded McAlford wince with pain.

"It's *Joan!*" he snapped through gritted teeth, and sprang ahead.

CHAPTER XXXII

JOAN

McALFORD dashing after his companion collided heavily with him at the turn in the tunnel which brought them into view of the speakers they had just heard. Fortunately, in the dim light the two explorers were not visible. Ahead under one of the pale-blue cavern lamps they witnessed a curious gathering.

Joan Beckett stood backed up against the rock wall. With hair awry and one hand clutching her slender throat she gave evidence of having been overtaken after swift pursuit.

Facing Joan stood Scammell. With feet apart, bullet head thrust forward, and finger shaking in the girl's defiant face, his threatening tone needed no words to make more clear his mood.

But what completed the picture, and in fact what had made Bliss Eppley pause in his mad rush to the assistance of the girl he loved, was a group of five or six scowling Norsemen just behind Scammell. These men were taking no part in the dispute. But it was patent from the way their expressions coincided with Scammell's ugly one that his issue was also theirs.

As Joan seemed to be in no immediate peril of her life, Bliss realized at once it were better to act with caution in order to assure success.

"We've got the automatic," Scotty reminded him in a whisper.

But Bliss's mind was engaged upon another matter: Why weren't the Norsemen more concerned with the

alarm that still roared down the cavern's twisted corridors? That instant Scammell's snarl broke out again.

"Make your choice, Miss Beckett, and make it quick. These fellows say that Eppley and McAlford are to blame. Both are gone. Your father's disappeared, so has Welchor. You know where your father is. Tell us and everything will be all right. Otherwise—" He paused.

"Otherwise what?" snapped Joan with no trace of surrender in her firm voice.

Scammell's hand dropped to her wrist with a swift cruel grip. She wrenched it instantly away. "Don't you dare touch me!"

From the Norsemen came a growl of impatience. One of them spoke to Scammell in a tone too low for Bliss to hear. Then—

"All right, Miss Beckett," Scammell went on, "you needn't tell us if you don't want to. This bunch say they have got to get out of here. They are scared about something. They have a nice little place where we can lock you up. And we are going to do it."

"Come on," urged Scotty again in a low tone. "We're armed."

Bliss shook his head. "No, not unless necessary; I think I can handle them alone. You stay back here in the shadows. If I seem to be getting the worst of it, shoot. Watch Scammell whatever you do."

Before McAlford could stop him Bliss strode forward. As he reached the group of Norsemen they retreated in surprise. Unarmed as they were and withdrawn for the moment from the mob spirit of their fellow villagers, they evidently had no appetite for combat.

Before Scammell could realize what had happened Bliss spun him about so that he staggered and half fell against the wall.

"Taken to insulting ladies, have you?" snapped Bliss contemptuously.

But Scammell's feelings had gone beyond the point of speech. Regaining his balance he sprang catlike for the man who had so far thwarted his and Welchor's chance for winning a fortune.

Fully prepared for the attack Bliss met it with a crashing blow which stretched the furious Scammell stunned and bleeding on the stony floor.

At once there rose an outcry from the Norsemen. Chattering and gesticulating their resentment at such intrusion they closed in.

"Run for the entrance, Joan!" Bliss shot at the girl still pressed against the wall behind him.

"I'll not run," came her sharp reply. Out of the corner of his eye Bliss saw her stoop quickly and take a revolver from the prone man's inner pocket.

"Shall I shoot?" came from Scotty in the shadows.

"No—No!" And to the girl, "Nor you, Joan. It is not necessary."

With that Bliss gave vent to a roar of battle and with fists swinging leaped toward the oncoming Norsemen. Down went the leader with a grunt of pain. The second man staggered back, palm to his streaming nose. The third hesitated, and, being unversed in the art of pugilism, sought to ram Bliss with his head. Which maneuver the latter sidestepped so neatly that the Viking nearly brained himself against the lava wall beyond.

"Now *go*—you idiots!" bellowed Bliss. "*Shoo!*"

At which, to the vast delight of Scotty who now appeared, the remaining members of the squad turned and fled pattering down the tunnel. As quickly as they could scramble to their feet the other two rose shakily and ran after their fellow tribesmen.

"Completely took them off their guard," laughed Bliss. "They weren't expecting action so soon."

He turned to Joan Beckett.

"You're a brick!" he exclaimed, "to stand by me that way."

"I'd do as much for any man outnumbered," was the prompt retort.

"Any man?" queried Bliss wistfully.

"Look here," broke in Scotty roughly. "This isn't a tea party. That alarm is still going. We've got to get out of here in a hurry, don't forget that."

Bliss prodded the prostrate Scammell with his foot.

"Get up. We'll settle this later." He stooped and helped the thoroughly cowed conspirator to stand.

"Where are you going?" asked Joan suspiciously.

"That's so, you don't understand." Bliss spoke rapidly. Scotty, nearly wild with anxiety, muttered profane urgings for them to go.

"Understand what?"

"That noise we hear. Listen." Louder than ever boomed the roar that had compelled them to dare the lizards' den. "It means the volcano is about to break out in eruption."

Joan, still hesitating, paled slightly. "But how do I know where you are taking me?" She gave the man before her a searching look.

"How do you know?" said Bliss, hurt deeper even than his voice told. "Joan, you know because you know I love you. I'm here mostly because I love you. I—"

"Jumping *tomcats*!" cried McAlford in disgust. "If you love her, come *on*!" Yanking Scammell after him the indignant speaker started towards the outside air and safety.

"Good for you, Mr. McAlford!" Joan shouted, and trotted after him. Over her shoulder she shot Bliss

JOAN

Eppley a look the dim light hid; a look that only a woman can give.

At that moment, to the horror of the two navy men, the alarm ceased.

"Probably means the actual eruption has begun!" cried Scotty.

Bliss, his heart in his throat, thudded on. For, as the other had suggested, if the sounding of the earthquake alarm by the cells warned the colony against volcanic catastrophe, it was reasonable to suppose that once the eruption began the cells no longer functioned,

CHAPTER XXXIII

ZR WINS!

“AND then—”

A Both men in telling their story always pause at this critical point to make sure that their audience shares with them some of their indescribable astonishment at what befell them next. For it must be remembered that both were by this time in a state of utter desperation. After their mad flight through the tunnel, their miraculous escape from Scotty's “crocodiles,” their lucky rescue of Joan Beckett, and their final assurance that the ceasing of the alarm could mean naught but instant explosion of the entire volcano, to come upon the sight they did was a shock that neither recovered from for hours.

The orderly sequence of events was as follows:

First, the tunnel the four traversed led not downward toward the laboratories, but up. So that when, suddenly, they found themselves with no barrier ahead emerging into the clear air of outdoors they immediately saw that they were at a point on the volcano's southern slope considerably above the level of the village.

Speechless they stood in the snow gazing down upon the green settlement, the clustered Norsemen, the dogs and the children.

And, on the outer edge of it all, hovered the ZR-5!

Speechless they stood and gazed as if waking from a dream, a hideous nightmare that had left them stunned and exhausted. Speechless they stood, dumfounded at the spectacle.

Where was the smoke from the burning lake of oil?

Why was there no excitement among the colonists at the prospect of the approaching eruption? Why—? Where—?

The two explorers turned to one another, their mouths and minds one seething mass of questions.

Silently they shook hands.

"I should say," remarked Bliss slowly, "that we have been for the past half hour a good deal like two lively pieces of butter in a red-hot skillet!"

"You describe us with impeccable accuracy," agreed his friend. "May I ask if you can account for any of these other miracles?"

"Only the alarm," laughed Bliss. "That was undoubtedly the noise of the dirigible's engines filtering up through the cavern's tunnels in such a way as to distort it beyond recognition. As for the mystery of how the lake of oil has been extinguished or how the ZR-5 reached here, or why—" he pointed to the crowd below—"our friend Welchor is standing there apparently in happy conversation, I cannot even remotely guess."

In mute appeal he turned to Joan. She shook her head.

"I know little more than you do. Mr. Welchor brought me and my father here. The next thing I knew came the riot. A man named Eric told us he was going to sledge around the mountain to where you were. My father joined him."

"Then he wanted to see us?"

"Of course," smiled Joan.

"But *why* 'of course'?"

For reasons of her own she paid no heed to the question. "This man Scammell tried to bully me into telling where my father had gone. He chased me through the cavern. Said a Norseman called Olaf the Hunter had been killed and the visitors were held to blame. He had just caught me when you two came along."

"Come on, let's go down," broke in Scotty. "If you two turtledoves persist in dawdling all the time we'll miss the train home."

At which Bliss shot a hopeful glance at Joan. But she only arched her brows and avoided his look.

There seemed nothing left but to descend. This they did circuitously and with caution. There was no assurance that the villagers had changed their tune. There was not even assurance that Captain Devon, who stood talking to Admiral Beckett and Welchor, would still be friendly.

"But," argued Eppley, "if we can only get under the wing of the dirigible we shall at least be temporarily safe from the Norsemen and from that crook."

Dodging from rock to rock they reached the level of the village green. Dashing from cover they plunged through the gaping crowd and presented themselves to the astonished Skipper. At once a growl of protest went up from the Norsemen. Captain Devon answered it with a stern look and held out both his hands to the ragged refugees who had so unexpectedly appeared. Joan gave her father a bear-hug which enabled her to whisper something in his ear. He grinned and glanced at Eppley.

"You don't seem popular here," he said quietly. There was a twinkle in his eyes that escaped the disconsolate lieutenant.

Welchor elbowed his way toward them. "I shouldn't think they would be, sir. They—"

"Never mind an argument," interrupted Admiral Beckett. "You understand, Captain Devon," he added to the Skipper, "that our time is short. We still have a chance to finish if this good weather holds."

Half dazed with bewilderment and groggy from exertion and lack of sleep Eppley and McAlford permitted themselves to be directed to a ladder under the control

car up which they wearily climbed. The former yearned for a friendly word from his Joan. But her persistent coolness left him hopeless and confused.

That the ZR-5 had received a good deal of repair work since last they'd seen her was apparent to both. She still was shy one pair of engines, and her rudder was largely patched. The rent in her sheathing was neatly closed; her control car had been roughly rebuilt. That such work could have been done on the ice seemed out of the question.

Both men waited at the hatch for the Skipper.

"You look completely done in," he told them kindly. "And I see no reason why both shouldn't have a few hours sleep before you do anything else."

"But what—how did you get here?" stammered Bliss. "Does Admiral Beckett realize what Welchor has done? Why—?"

Captain Devon laid his hand gently on the bedraggled speaker's arm. "Never mind those questions now, my boy. Take a bit of sleep and then you shall know the whole truth. But rest assured that everything is all right."

Bliss suddenly recalled the packet of papers inside his shirt which he had taken from Olaf's sledge before that unfortunate creature had been overwhelmed by the avalanche. He dragged them out. "A little more evidence, sir," he said.

He went aft towards the sleeping quarters. He slipped off his grimy clothes and rolled like a log into one of the bunks.

But sleep would not come. There was still too much unanswered.

Indeed, the last thing he had seen on entering the dirigible was Thorne Welchor climbing the ladder into the control car as if nothing had happened. Why wasn't he continuing in his own plane? Or, if it were still out

of commission, why had he not reported the matter and insisted on the missing parts being replaced? Indeed, how had he escaped at all?

Bliss's thoughts turned dully to Joan's father. Why was the old gentleman so noncommittal? If he believed Welchor's side of things he would certainly have shown more hostility to both men when they rejoined the ZR-5. On the other hand, if he had finally been convinced of the justice of their claims he would not have been so cool towards them.

Then Joan. . . . He groaned. "Does she still think that I am the scoundrel Welchor told her I was? What—"

But at that instant sleep mercifully fell upon the exhausted and melancholy traveler.

.
He was awakened by being violently shaken. Having been in the midst of a dream wherein he was beset by mammoths as large as tenement houses, lizards the size of dirigibles, and Norsemen thirty feet high, it is not to be wondered at that he nearly leaped through the bottom of the bunk above him. But recognizing McAlford's voice as well as the asphyxiating odor of his friend's powerful cigar, he sank back and demanded to know the reason for this assault.

"Nothing in particular," said the other in a dry tone, "except that it's next morning and I thought it about time you came to."

"Next morning!"

"So the quartermaster tells me. Judging by the way I've slept I should say it might be the morning after next."

Scotty twisted his face into a grimace that Bliss knew meant he was trying to look serious though he didn't feel serious at all.

"Oh, yes," he went on, "I forgot to tell you that we're right over the North Pole. I thought you might like to come out and have a look."

"You blamed lunatic!" shouted Bliss and sprang to the deck.

In ten minutes he was shaved, into a clean shirt, and on his way to the pilot house. He found Admiral Beckett and Captain Devon there before him.

"The Pole," said the Skipper and inclined his head towards the ice pack several hundred feet below. Had he said, "There goes a Ford," or, "Do you see that seal on the ice?" he could not have been more casual.

Silently Bliss gazed down. On every side as far as he could see spread the pack. Except that it was less broken and ridged it was exactly the same wilderness of snow-covered ice over which he had flown and sledged so short a while before.

And yet it was different. For while the outward aspect of the Summit of the World was not remarkably unlike most of the three million square miles of ice that surrounded it, the things it stood for made the seeing of it enthralling beyond description.

From this point there was no such thing as north or east or west. No matter in which direction a man stepped from the axis of the globe he could move only south.

At this point the days were one year long. Morning came in April. June was noon; for then the circling sun achieved its highest altitude above the horizon. In September ended the three months' afternoon; and on the twenty-third of that month the sun set for the long black bitter night of the Pole.

The ice at this point was nearly 10,000 feet above the bottom of the Polar Sea. The Antipodal Pole was, conversely, elevated by nearly an equal amount. Thus was largely proved the theory that the earth is tetrahedral in

configuration; flat on top and peaked on its bottom, the South Pole.

Towards this point on the surface of the globe had men striven for five long centuries. Death and indescribable sufferings had not stood in their way. At this point had been planted the Stars and Stripes before the flag of any other nation.

This point, though termed the North Pole, was directly south from the Magnetic Pole, a tremendously more important spot to mankind.

Across this point was destined in future ages to stream an unceasing cataract of commerce, of hurrying men and women on business bent, of leisurely tourists determined to see the romantic spots of their globe before the end.

What more romantic spot exists?

Entered the radio operator and handed Admiral Beckett a yellow sheet. Twice the Admiral read the message. He put on his glasses and read it again. He handed it to Captain Devon to read.

"That settles it, I'd say," he snapped.

With a side glance at Eppley the Skipper queried:

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't tell him the whole story now, sir?"

"None whatever."

Whereupon Bliss learned what his curiosity craved.

So far as the ZR's arrival at the Norse village at such a critical moment was concerned, it had been a coincidence, to be sure; but by no means a miracle. Shortly after Eppley and McAlford had left her she had been put into commission by rigging a small jury rudder and starting two of her engines. Welchor's alleged explosion was a pure fabrication. Instead of attempting to reach the new land at once Captain Devon had very sensibly taken advantage of the favorable wind and weather and had flown her without incident back to Alaska. At the

Point Barrow Camp her rudder had been rebuilt and major repairs rushed to completion. Finally, knowing the latitude and longitude of the discovery, her commander had made his second flight out over the Polar Sea with almost the speed of his first one. He had reached the volcano just in time to find Welchor, whom Kristina had released, raving and tearing his hair because he thought Scammell, who had disappeared, must have made off with his plane.

The joke of it was that Welchor had suddenly lost his nerve and confessed everything with the understanding that he would not be punished. He described in detail the plot in which he had been engaged. He told how Scammell had been concealed among the rocks while Eppley and McAlford were putting the plane temporarily out of commission by hiding her electrical connections. The persistence of these two men, he admitted, as well as his growing doubt about his ultimate success, had so unnerved him that he then and there concluded to confess.

"But *why* has the lake of oil stopped burning?" burst Bliss, unable to control his curiosity on that point.

The Skipper reached over and patted him on his back. "Another leaf in your laurels, my boy. That lake would have burned long ago in this volcanic country if it had been just oil. But through the oil bubbles a continual stream of gas. One of the Norsemen, your friend Holgrimson, gave me a sample of that gas. It is helium."

"*Helium!*"

"Absolutely. You have discovered the only large natural helium gas-well in the world. And helium being the one safe gas, of course makes it far more valuable than any precious mineral we might have found."

"But the fire?"

"Well, you remember that helium not only is nonflammable, but it is a noncomburent. It smothers any

flame near it. Soon after Scammell's sinister fuse began its work a light north wind picked up and '*flip!*' the fire went out. That's what has happened in the past every time a volcanic bomb fell into the lake. Else it would have been burned up long ago."

Bliss nodded smilingly. "That explains why the lake went out, sir. And how you managed to get Welchor aboard. And I know already that what we thought were the alarm cells was only the noise of your motors sweeping into the cavern. But there is still something else I'd like to know." He glanced towards the Admiral, who twinkled back in quick understanding.

"My boy," said the old sea dog, "you have won yourself an enviable position in the hearts of all Americans. When that rascal Welchor told how you had struggled up over the ice and reached the land just ahead of him Devon took his actual words down and sent them by radio to Washington with my other report."

"Thank—thank you, sir!" stammered Bliss.

"The telegram I received just now was simply a confirmation of some of the details brought out by Welchor's papers you were clever enough to secure. I permitted him to send my voucher, feeling sure all would be squared before it reached its destination. The power behind him has, by the way, disavowed any official connection with the scoundrels who provided him money. He would never have been paid unless those same Orientals had been able to bleed their own country for double that amount."

"Which saves a deal of hard feeling," interposed the Skipper.

"You will be interested to know that when Joan and I—"

Bliss caught his breath, but the Admiral pretended not to notice.

"—reached Point Barrow I knew of the entire plot.

Fearing complications Washington had decided not to attempt any transmitted instructions, even in code, but trusted solution of the matter to me. You can imagine my feelings when Welchor invited me to accompany him on an aërial survey of the new land."

"But Joan, sir?"

The Admiral held up his hand. "It is not courtesy to interrupt your superior officer, Eppley," rebuked the Admiral, with a look of mock severity over the rims of his glasses.

"Ahem! *Harumph!*" coughed the Skipper.

"At any rate I have sent full details to the State Department. I have set Congressional machinery in motion to make this land a national park at once. Its resources will of course be at the Government's disposal. But all visitors will be controlled absolutely by proper authorities. Thus we shall not violate the peace and security of the Norse colony: nor shall we permit them to be exploited at the expense of their privacy. Their scientific developments will remain federal secrets until such time as we can properly publish them to the commercial world. Incidentally, I have arranged with Hroar Holgrimson to take small parties of his people to visit the southern world at his discretion. In view of their approaching marriage your young friends Eric and Kristina are to be among the first to make the trip."

The Admiral paused and stroked his grizzled chin in a gesture of hesitation.

"The matter of the Board meeting," he resumed, "I mean your supposed divulgence of the ZR's plans, I have also straightened out. You protected me. I squared you by describing to the Department my absurd trust in this villain Welchor."

Turning to Captain Devon he queried: "You have him safely confined?"

"Yes, sir."

"You see, we did not wish to have the villagers suppose he was our prisoner. They might have put a wrong construction on the matter. But Devon and I secured his confession before he had time to stir up further riot. Also we threatened to tell the Norsemen, whose confidence we had gained, the truth about his villainy if he did not come aboard quietly. You saw how submissive he was, didn't you?"

Again the Admiral paused. With a bantering smile he scrutinized the eager face before him. Suddenly he said:

"Oh, by the way, there's some one in the mess room whom you really ought to be talking to instead of me. A young lunatic, I'd say, judging from certain peculiar behavior I have witnessed."

For the beat of a pulse Bliss stared at the Admiral. Then, with an exclamation of mixed hope and doubt, he sprang across the little pilot house deck and into the room beyond.

Her face transfigured, Joan stood before him.

"I'm forgiven?" blurted Bliss.

"But *I'm* the only one who needs to be forgiven," she replied in a low voice of ineffable sweetness.

A pause, then, "Joan, I want you to see something." Bliss led her to the little window and pointed to the ice pack far below. "Like that, Joan dear, life ahead seems now. White and clean and sparkling."

"But, oh, so cold, Bliss!"

The hand that had somehow caught in his trembled slightly. He gripped it.

"Cold?" he echoed with his little twisted smile, which, Joan knew, came only at times when some particular thought assailed him. The next instant she learned what the thought had been. For, without haste, yet so strongly

ZR WINS!

and warmly that there could be no resisting, Bliss drew her to him, seeming to wrap his arms around and around her yielding body. But just as her lips met his the contact seemed to close another circuit. For, from somewhere aft, broke the old familiar buzzing and crackling from which emerged the following historic announcement:

“. . . . WZK WZK. We have just received official word of the great transpolar flight. Once more the Stars and Stripes have been planted at the Pole. Our American dirigible, the ZR wins! ZR wins! . . .”

(¹)

THE END

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